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ANNE DOUGLAS SEDGWICK

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BY

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CHAPTER I

I SUPPOSE I have hated her from the first moment I saw her,' Monica Wilmott heard herself saying, and she saw Hester as she had first seen her, sitting in the open window of the Chelsea drawing-room against the background of the river; extraordinarily quiet, extraordinarily assured, with black eyebrows and a thin black cloak lined with red. She had thought of Hester almost constantly since Clive had married her, but this habit of thinking aloud had crept upon her only since she had come to live alone in Essex, and it frightened her a little when she caught herself at it; it was dangerous, as anything automatic in life might be dangerous; a thing like that, said aloud, became much more real; more real than it was; one might shut oneself up in the cell of a self-suggestion if one listened to it. So now, on this solitary afternoon, darkened by cold summer rain, she rose from the window-seat where she had been looking out at the village-green, and

walked with a swift step down the oddly shaped room that turned an angle at the chimney-piece and fell to a lower level reached by three shallow steps. The casement windows in the upper portion opened under a thatch, and the ceiling there was low and crossed by ancient beams; the little house had been contrived from two old cottages, and the second, loftier room was modern.

Monica Wilmott descended to it and looked out on the altered view, as uneventful as the first had been. There was a touch of romance in the silhouettes of the hedgerow elms; but it was a tame romance and her own house made part of it, so comfortably, so consciously picturesque with its beams and plaster, its eddying thatch and climbing roses. Never would she have chosen to live in such a house, nor to live in Essex at all, were it not that Clive lived in London and that here, though parted from him, she was near him. Oddley Green was almost suburban and the railway station lay but a mile away; she could hear the whistle of the trains as they passed all day and night, and she was glad to hear them; they seemed a link with London and with Clive.

Turning from the window she glanced at her husband's Indian water-colours, hanging in a row round

the walls as they had hung in all her makeshift homes all the thirty years since his death, and then at the goldfish in their bowl. Clive, from babyhood, had loved goldfish and she had always had them, too, in her drawing-rooms. Her eyes gathered an intentness as she watched the glancing fish, seeing herself suddenly like them, like them bright, rapid, frustrated, and the bitter flicker of a smile crossed her face as she took ants' eggs from a little porcelain box and scattered them on the water. She went back, then, to the upper room, — 'I am restless,' she thought. 'Like the goldfish,' — and, beside the fireplace, she came to a standstill, putting her foot on the stone curbing, her hand on the high stone shelf and looking round her — at the walnut bureau where her mother had sat every day in the spacious London home of her girlhood; at the French clock that she and her father, the clever London judge, had bought in Paris; at the portrait of her Scotch great-grandmother, a girl with bare shoulders above white satin, pearls in her tawny hair, and blue eyes like her own; not soft, not gentle blue; intrepid, rather, and ardent with their smile. The faded chintzes on the chairs and sofas she and Clive had chosen together seven years ago, for the flat in Chelsea; every rose and pheasant and carnation

brought memories of that one epoch of her life when she had been aware of a garnered, a conscious happiness. And, as she remembered it, her eyes fell and in her stillness she might have been standing there to have her picture painted, a touch of something gracefully obsolete, for all the modernity of her straight lines and shortened skirts, in the falling sleeves of her black dress, the loose short jacket, the bow of velvet at her throat. Resolutely drawn against the dark background, the lines of her downcast profile were at once gay, impatient and imperative; the lifted upper lip sweet, the lower lip stubborn, the nose a little thick, a little clumsy, like a child's nose, but with a nostril all delicacy and decision. Her golden hair, twisted round her head, made a brightness in the room. Clive had said that she had the hair of Helen of Troy. He had also said, playing at their game of analogies, that she was like a falcon, a jar of honey, a spray of rosemary; and there was, indeed, an almost vestal fierceness in Monica Wilmott; something high, hovering, and perhaps a little ruthless. Her tresses might be the tresses of Helen, her fair glancing face might allure like the face of a siren over the sea, but her two distant years of marriage had left intact something of girlhood that survived into her middle years, and

her maternity had expressed itself not only in passionate comradeship with her child, but in swift repudiation of all matrimonial approaches. She was impatient of sentimental predicaments; averse, even hostile to any display of amorous emotion.

She was remembering those years after the war as she stood there, that time of halcyon sweetness when, like two tempest-tossed sea-gulls, she and Clive had floated side by side in a sunlit harbour; the happiest time of her life. She had never been inclined to pathos or self-pity. She had, for all the years of his boyhood, eaten her cold mutton in the West Kensington lodgings, run the hat shop, written the articles on the French countryside, since only so could she send him to Winchester and Oxford; and the road she trod was never dusty to her, since Clive's future was its goal. But when, her goal attained, the tidal wave of the war broke over the world, she had, for a suffocating and swooning moment, seen herself as a collapsed and falling form with bubbles rising from its mouth. She remembered now the turmoil of horrifying darkness, the sensation, while it lasted, of holding her breath and swimming under water, and then the emergence, tragic, since Clive was brought back to her almost dying of his wounds, yet ecstatic, for he was in her

arms again and death now was an antagonist that they could face together. His slow return to life and to her had recalled the trembling sweetness of her pregnancy, and when he was safe at last it was as if he had been born again. All the good things had come to her at once; Clive's recovery and Aunt Janet's legacy and the post in the staunch old City shipping-office to make them in their own eyes opulent. It was true that she had never thought of a shipping-office as the end of all her efforts; she had thought of Clive as a soldier, like his father, or a lawyer, like his grandfather, or the poet that his verses had seemed to promise; but the shipping-office, when it came, was indeed a harbour and what wonder, with all the sudden security, that she had been blind to the change in Clive, the change, she saw so clearly now, that had made him Hester's prey. His child face rose before her as she tried to define to herself in what it had consisted; one day, when very tiny, he had had little friends to tea and been horribly shy and afraid of them. Fear, with Clive, never took the form of subterfuge or awkwardness. He had sat there, very upright in his white suit, at the end of the nursery table, a pale, golden little boy; and though he could not assume a smile he could muster a perfect courtesy. The

only signs by which his mother had read his deep distress were the stiffening of his small upper lip and the way in which he repeatedly raised his eyebrows, opening his eyes very wide the while. And only to-day did this distant memory supply its link of association; for Clive, when he came back to life, was constantly raising his eyebrows and opening his eyes very wide; and if he as constantly contrived to smile, she saw now that that had been because of her and because, for love of her, he could dissemble. A mother might give life; but even a mother could not give the zest for life. The war had left him a frightened bird huddled under a hedge with its wing broken. That was the truth of it. That was what Hester must have felt in him; helplessness; helplessness and beauty. Even her prosaic eye had been charmed by the bird's beauty; commonplace young huntress as she had been, striding through the woods in search of prey.

But it was unjust; she knew it was unjust. Hatred made one unjust and horrible. She looked a moment longer at the dark fireplace and then, taking the matches, stooped and lighted the logs. Let us have more light, was the instinct within her. Let us face things. — Own up and see yourself as you are; perhaps the merely jealous mother, unable to

endure that another woman should make your son happy. Did it really come to that? Or had it been because of Celia that she had seen Hester from the first with hostile eyes?

'How did it all begin?' said Monica, watching the flames leap up.

'Who is Clive's new friend?' Margaret Orde had asked. 'The queer dark girl who dresses like a boy?' It was so it had begun, the first hint brushing lightly yet sharply, like a branch of briar drawn across one's face on a woodland ramble. Clive had seemed to share his life to every jot and tittle with her; and he had told her nothing of a new friend who was dark and queer. From the very first there had been a sharpness, a surmise.

'Where did you see them? He has so many friends and all girls dress like boys nowadays,' she had said.

Good old Margaret who lived out at Chiswick with her ancient father, loved these tea-table talks and to hear every detail of Monica and Clive's London life. She insisted now, all interest and all innocence, on her topic.

'Boys don't curl their hair over their ears, or wear pink silk stockings, and neither did this girl. Her hair was brushed back and she wore what looked

like riding boots; but I expect they were rubber; very sensible, for it was raining.'

'Could it have been Agatha Milford? — but Agatha would hardly come to London in riding clothes.'

'Oh, it wasn't Miss Milford — I remember her perfectly; I met her here at tea one day, you know. She's lovely. This girl had very big eyes and looked rather ill-tempered; but perhaps she was only very intellectual or artistic. It was at that show of queer pictures in Grafton Street. — Clive didn't see me, so I didn't interrupt them.'

Monica asked no further question but she had, already, a sense of something surreptitious that faintly menaced her. She telephoned to Celia that evening and asked her to come and dine with them and bring her violin. Since they had first played together, since Celia's childhood, Clive had been their audience, so much at one with them in his part of listener that they made a trio rather than a duet. But he had seemed tired that night when he came in and she had felt, all through the lovely Schubert Sonatina, that he was not really listening, that he was not thinking of her or Celia or Schubert but of the queer dark girl. And after that, as the days passed and he said nothing of the new friend,

he suddenly became much older in her eyes; a man as he had never been before; never again to be her child only.

'Wouldn't it be nice if Celia could come with us to Paris this Easter?' It must have been a fortnight later that she had asked him this question, one evening when he and she had returned together from the play and were drinking hot bouillon in the drawing-room. He was standing opposite her, his cup in his hand, and as he looked at her she saw that his sweet, attentive face was jaded, almost haggard.

'Paris? Were we thinking of Paris, Mummy?' he asked.

'Well, wouldn't it be rather nice for Easter? We have not been there since before the war, nor has Celia. We could show her everything.' France had been one of the family traditions in Monica's youth and she had seen to it that Clive inherited it. She was always scraping and saving in the West Kensington days to give him his holidays in France, to see cathedrals and follow the course of the great French rivers with knapsacks on their backs.

'That would be delightful,' said Clive, 'but what about summer? Isn't Easter rather early for Paris?'

'Oh, I always think it a heavenly time then, the horse-chestnuts just beginning to bud, and violets in the streets. — Had you thought of anything else?'

He was still looking at her, and now he lifted his eyebrows and opened his eyes very widely; then said: 'I have been asked to go to Cornwall for Easter — some new friends of mine. — But of course I could give that up if you have fixed your heart on Paris, Mummy.'

A violent struggle took place within her, but she mastered it. 'Of course you mustn't give it up. Who are the new friends?' It was inevitable that she should ask that now; he could feel no pressure in that.

'Rather a nice couple,' said Clive. 'He is the editor of "The Protest" — you know that clever weekly — and she is artistic and does batik scarves and curtains. Jessup is their name and they have three nice little children. I am not sure you would care for them though, Mummy. I shall find out, in Cornwall.'

He was now smiling at her quite clearly. He was grateful to her for not holding him back from Cornwall.

'Only those two?'

'And some friends of theirs, two or three friends, who have cottages near by. It's on the cliffs near the Lizard; it's lovely there in early spring they say.'

'Are the friends artistic too?' She felt as if she were creeping after a tiger in the jungle.

'Yes, they are all artistic I think,' said Clive, moving to the fireplace. 'Write or paint or act, you know; — all very busy and modern.'

'What form does their modernness take?'

'What form does it take? Well, I don't quite know. Talk in the main, I think; they are great talkers; very unshackled,' and Clive tried to smile, looking over at her, but his smile was no longer clear. He knew now that he had something to hide and that she was trying to find it, and, while bitterness surged in her against the dark girl who made Clive hide from her, who made them both, suddenly, fear each other — she contrived to ask, lightly: 'Is anybody shackled nowadays, my dear?'

'Oh, *we* all are!' said Clive, and he laughed. 'People who dress for dinner, I mean, and are presented at Court and take in the "Quarterly Review" ——' He glanced at it lying on his mother's table.

Her bitterness found an outlet. 'I haven't painted, it's true, or acted, or made batik scarves,

but I have written, and run an antique shop, and trimmed hats! It seems to me that I know the dusty arena as well as any modern woman — that I am as modern in that as any of them; — even though I *was* presented at Court in the dark ages!'

Clive crossed over to her. She had done what she intended; made herself real and near to him; bound him to her — but, when he came to her like that and put his arms around her, she had known that the heavy beating of his heart was for the secret he hid from her as much as for his love and retrospective pity. And she had known, with a cruel pain, that she had asked her son for gratitude. She hardly kept herself from weeping as she heard him say: 'Oh, darling Mummy — don't I know it! Do you think that you need ever remind me? Do you think that I shall ever forget all that you have done for me!'

So they had clung together — their embrace effacing nothing, and he had gone to Cornwall for Easter and when he came back was engaged to Hester Blakeston.

CHAPTER II

IT was not Hester's face that she was seeing now, as she stood, looking down into the flames; it was her son's; when he had told her; a face of fear. It had been because of fear that he had, till now, told her nothing and she had known that she must hide from him at once, lest he should guess at hers — and see his own too plainly; and responding to their peril with an automatic swiftness she had said: 'My darling! I'm so glad! Tell me all about it.'

Not a word of reproach, but Clive, holding her, his face against her shoulder, had said: 'Forgive me, Mummy; — but I cared so desperately; I was so afraid she wouldn't have me; I couldn't bear to speak of it — even to you — till I was sure.'

'Of course — of course. Of course I understand,' she said. And she had understood; but most of all that had he been sure of her liking the woman he loved he must have confided in her. He was not sure. He was afraid. But she sustained and reassured him. The lover's radiance flowered from him as he told her all about his wonderful Hester. She was a modern girl, very modern, a product of Girton

and post-war London. She had had a miserable girlhood; her mother was dead and her father a parson in the Midlands. Hester had made her own living ever since leaving college. She had done really remarkable work. The Jessups thought it remarkable. She had travelled through Bolshevik Russia, risking her life, and written a series of articles for 'The Protest,' and she was tremendously interested in psycho-analysis and social reform.

'A socialist, I suppose?' Monica had blithely enquired. — And why not? Her youngest brother had been a provocative socialist, thirty years ago at Oxford, and had come home to call them all 'pleasant thieves' — a phrase that made their father — jovial and caustic — with his rough tawny head — loudly laugh. But Clive said that Hester followed no isms of any sort; was completely detached and sane — 'The sanest person I have ever known, except you, Mummy.'

'I must love her. I cannot keep him unless I can love her,' Monica had thought. She remembered that she had knelt down and prayed for strength and wisdom and selflessness. And when he brought her was it not true that she had gone to meet her with unhostile, with hopeful eyes?

And now again she saw her, sitting in the open

window on the hot July day, extraordinarily quiet, extraordinarily assured. Her face was vehement; childlike yet haggard; with, already, the indication of a line running along the cheek to the corner of the mouth, and a deeper line engraved across her forehead, which she showed when she doffed her hat, unceremoniously, for tea. She showed then, too, a beautifully shaped head, the dark hair, thick and dense and straight, brushed back from a meditative arch of brow; and the indignant composure of her large eyes made Monica think of a Byzantine Madonna. 'A repellent little face!' That had been the involuntary, the irrepressible verdict that had surged up in Monica's mind on seeing her fully. In her considering gaze she read already the relegation of her own standards and significances. Hester would never trouble to controvert them; she would merely look away from them, and over them; they were not so much out of date as irrelevant; and a woman of the Hester type had no time for irrelevancies. Monica saw her placing her and deciding how to deal with her as they sat face to face, she herself, as she too well knew, wearing the smile that her own panic forced from her. Hester did not smile; she answered questions and asked none, looking now and then

about the room, while Clive sitting a little behind her, radiant perhaps, but still haggard, watched them with an intentness under which his mother still seemed to hear that heavy beating of his heart. Meretricious, frivolous, trivial — that was what Hester was thinking her; the smug, sheltered, upholstered, late-Victorian woman; reared on obsolete traditions, sustained by a doomed social system, buttressed by old china and mezzotints of simpering ancestresses. She could not remember anything that Hester had said at this first interview; she could only remember her assessing silence; but never, never to her dying day, would she forget the minute yet portentous incident that she had witnessed after they left her. She had gone to the window to watch them as they walked away in the little slip of garden beneath the flats, and she saw Clive bend his head to speak to the girl, as though in pleading or reassurance and that, for all response, not looking at him, she had laid hold of the hem of his coat, staying herself on him, or staying him on her, as she walked beside him. Their unity could not have been made more piercingly apparent to the mother's fierce eyes watching from above. Hester's possessorship of her son was rivetted upon her mind by the unemotional little gesture. Not

only Clive's subjection was made clear to her, but Hester's still, impassive strength.

And then Celia. Celia who loved Clive; who should have married him. She had had to tell her that very evening when she came in for a practice. Standing there in the twilit room, still, gentle, unprotesting, her violin hanging by her side, she had received the blow. — 'Clive is engaged to be married, Celia; — to a girl none of us know.' So she had phrased it, controlling the trembling of her voice. 'Her name is Hester Blakeston. She's a journalist. — You must come and meet her next Monday, for they are to be married very soon.' And then, seeing the girl's brave smile, bitterness had broken from her: 'I'm afraid I shall never forgive her for taking him from you,' she had said.

'But she hasn't taken him from me,' Celia answered quickly. 'I shall always care for him more than for anybody; — but he never cared for me in that way.' And as Monica stood silent, she added, looking intently at her: — 'Oh, Monica, don't start wrong!'

Celia had seen her as starting wrong from the very beginning; even after her own meeting with Hester she had seen her friend as wrong. And, of

course, it had been wrong to have been so aware, on that second hot July afternoon, of the contrast between Clive's elect and his bride rejected. There sat Celia — his affinity in type and tradition, whatever Hester might be by the dark forces of the blood — with her unflawed gentleness, her unflawed dignity, ethereal in pearly greys and whites; while Hester in her black and red, with dust upon her shoulders, was, she knew, conscious of the contrast, and only just escaped sulkiness by being surly. And, as they moved to the tea-table, she had asked her — prompted, perhaps, by malicious subconscious forces of which she was only now aware: 'What are you going to wear, Hester?'

Hester, after her wont, had taken off her hat and, dropping into the seat that Clive placed for her, passing her hand over her hair, she looked across the table at her mother-in-law-to-be, her chin a little dropped, as though not understanding, or not wishing to understand, the question.

'For your wedding?' Monica had smiled, perhaps too radiantly. 'There is nothing so lovely as white satin, is there? — And I have an old lace veil of my great-grandmother's that has been waiting since my wedding for a bride in the family.' She had perhaps meant it kindly; really kindly; she had certainly

meant to show Clive her willingness to adorn his beloved with her most cherished possessions; but even as she spoke she saw Celia's flower-like head bent beneath the veil and thought, swiftly: — 'But *we* are all so fair!'

Hester, after considering what was placed before her conversationally — Monica had already noticed this — and finding that she could not agree with it, was capable of making no reply, and for a moment now Monica feared — or hoped (only it was too late to hope for any estrangement) — that she would vouchsafe none. But, after a pause, looking steadily at the tea-pot, she said:

'I don't think a lace veil would look particularly well in a Registrar's office.'

'A Registrar's office!' Monica still heard the metallic note of her own voice as she said it. Clive in a Registrar's office! She stood there, the caddie in her hand, and she could not pretend to smile.

'Clive and I are going to get married in a Registrar's office,' said Hester. 'I have no religious beliefs and I don't like being stared at by a crowd of strangers.'

'But,' said Monica, carefully, after a moment; 'there will be no strangers.'

'Not to you; but they would be strangers to me,' said Hester, not provocatively, stating, merely, the fact that concerned her.

'There would be your friends as well as ours — and ours will all be yours.'

'A Registrar's office is rather small for such a crowd; ask anybody you please, of course. I shall have one or two only.'

'But a church has nothing to do with religious beliefs.'

'Hasn't it?' Hester slightly smiled. 'It's that way of looking at a church — as though it were a wedding cake — that I don't like. Perhaps I take churches more seriously than you do. I am the daughter of a parson,' and Hester laughed, unmirthfully.

'I only mean' — Monica knew that she had put herself in the wrong — 'that a church stands for a past and a future; what our ancestors believed, what our children may believe; it transcends completely any question of individual feeling. And many of us there would be believing; — quite enough to justify the occasion.'

She, too, smiled; but hers was the forced smile that seemed to reach down within her and wring her heart-strings as she felt its falsity. There was

nothing forced or false about Hester; helping herself to bread and butter she replied:

'I don't ask to be justified. Other people's beliefs don't concern me. If it would offend you to come, you know, Clive and I could slip out quietly some morning and have it done without troubling anybody.'

'Oh — no; no,' Monica had muttered, feeling her pale cheeks burn suddenly. 'I must come to my son's wedding.'

She had not dared look at Clive or Celia. She knew that she was worsted. She knew that they were unhappy and that only Hester preserved the guise of imperturbability. She and Hester had met and their rapiers had clashed, in the presence of terribly interested witnesses; but it was she who had fallen back; her rapier that was splintered.

Afterwards, when she and Celia were left alone, desperate tears had risen and she could not conceal them. Celia came to her and put her arms around her.

'But, you know — I *do* see what she means,' she had said gently.

'So do I!' Monica rejoined with intense bitterness.

'It *is* to make a wedding-cake out of a church — if you don't believe anything,' Celia said.

'Then why refuse to have mere wedding-cake — if it pleases your foolish mother-in-law?'

'Because she wants to be straight. I do see that about her, Monica. — She wants to be straight, more than anything. — Please don't start wrong; it will make Clive so miserable; — already he's afraid,' Celia murmured while Monica now wept openly.

She turned now from the fire and went back to the window-seat and again looked out at the driving rain. Her mind travelled over the past five years and saw Hester always the same, imperturbably pursuing her own way and making it Clive's; but there was no injury to recall, no fault to record. If Clive's friends had not cared for his wife and had tended to fall away, that was not Hester's fault. If Clive looked a little dimmed and dumb and out of the picture that Hester put him in, he never looked unhappy. He never looked unhappy when he was with Hester; it was only with her, his mother, that Clive was, gently, silently, ill at ease. It was her relationship with her son that was ruined, or almost ruined; because she could not like his wife. She had tried to; faithfully, if desperately. She recalled the parties she had gone to, in the little Chelsea house that had been her wedding-

gift to Clive. Hester and her friends had furnished it; her own taste and help had not been requested and she soon observed that the lovely bits of glass, of china, the one or two really good engravings that she bestowed upon the young ménage were exiled, in order that they might not disturb a unity of design with which they jarred. How she disliked Hester's drawing-room! — so gaunt, so glaring, so unadjusted to human needs and frailties, so cut off from all complicity with the past. It seemed to challenge you to disagree with it as you entered, to nudge you maliciously on its angular chairs, to suffocate you surreptitiously with the many cushions of its enormous divan. On the walls, the perspective of the few pictures slanted dizzily towards you; you wanted to push the knife, the mug, the herring and the apple back to equilibrium. On the mantelpiece stood three small sculptured animals, menacing in their solid, misshapen vitality. The batik curtains of a dramatic purple shade seemed inappropriate as a background to afternoon tea and London gossip. In Hester's drawing-room she had felt herself an anachronism, a half-absurd survival. But Hester's friends went well with it. They were often drab and dusty and often picturesque and brightly coloured, but whether they lounged on the

divan or sat bolt upright on the chairs they were terribly intelligent. Their laughter ripped up ancient faiths; their gravity undermined stalwart policies. They seemed to believe in none of the creeds one had ever heard of, but they held creeds of their own with a fierce intolerance and could become very angry with each other. Monica enjoyed seeing them quarrel. She disliked them all intensely and when she saw that they took Clive lightly she hated them. 'Hester's amber cigarette-holder' she had heard him called one evening by a jibing young couple who did not see her on the stairs above them. And indeed Clive moved among them all, against Mrs. Jessup's batik curtains, a background figure. He did not look in the least oppressed — or impressed; neither did he look ironic. He talked to anyone who seemed to be neglected and passed the claret-cup and sandwiches.

It was after this party that Monica decided to leave London and live in the country. Her gifts to the young couple had depleted her resources and her London, the London shared with Clive, had ceased to exist; but to her own consciousness the withdrawal was less of a retreat than a flight. She could not risk living on near Clive. She had not the strength to go on hiding from him, at such close

quarters, how much she disliked his wife. There had been every sort of good reason to allege and Celia had been the chief of them, for Celia's lungs had been threatened, and after a winter in Switzerland she had gone to live with a devoted woman-friend who ran a little chicken-farm in Essex. Every aspect of recoil was removed by Celia's presence. 'I can never be lonely with you at hand and Celia so near and Jeremy with me day and night — can I?' she had said. Clive, perhaps, had been convinced. Even when Jeremy, the dear West Highland terrier who had grown up with him, died, he had remained, she felt sure, unaware of her deadly loneliness, though he had begged her to let him give her another dog. But she could not replace Jeremy. Another dog would have been a mere effigy. She often felt that she herself had become an effigy, bearing on its face the waxen smile of the past, and she often felt that it would be better to be dead. But that, she suspected, smiling ironically as she leaned her head against the window-frame and closed her eyes, was only when she was angry. She still longed too much for Clive to wish to leave a world where he lived. It was mere sentimentality to say that everything was over when one could suffer like this and tear one's heart. Why could she

not acquiesce and be at peace? Why could she not rest in the conviction of his happiness? — for that he was mended, that Hester made him happy, she felt sure. Should it not be enough for a mother to know that her son was happy? — 'Lord, now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.' The words rose in her mind. That was what a mother must be able to say.

The wicket-gate clicked as she thought it, and opening her eyes she saw Hester coming up the path holding Robin by the hand.

CHAPTER III

ROBIN was in his little waterproof hood and cape, all shining in the rain, and her delight at seeing him was so great that she had not time for surprise. He was marvellously like Clive at the same age. — 'Mouse-face,' she had used to say to her little son, tilting back the face to kiss it; and Robin's hood framed the same broad brow and narrow chin. His eyes were darker than his father's and his pallor more golden; but there was the same austerely sweet modelling of the cheek and lip, the same pale, bright hair. Yes, he, too, was the colour of amber, exquisite little creature.

And there went Hester's rubber boots beside him; she still wore rubber boots in rainy weather and they certainly became her slender form, her small foot, her indolent and decisive gait. As she glanced up, behind her rain-driven pane, at Hester's face, a phrase from a pitiful little tale of Maupassant's came to her mind: '*Elle est ben trop noire*' the old peasant mother had said of the proposed negress daughter-in-law, reiteration her only argument. What if, on first seeing Hester, she had relapsed to the same animal antipathy and said to Clive:

'*Elle est ben trop noire*'? Could it possibly have parted him from Hester? But Hester was not *trop noire*. It was absurd and malicious to say it. She was the nut-brown maid in type. — 'And as sound as a nut,' Monica muttered. Her brooding loneliness set her mind singing to these chimes, but this involuntary tribute cheered her. She did not hate Hester if she thought her as sound as a nut. And, keeping her place at the window, she heard her say: 'Come on, Robin; — don't dawdle,' in her rational, unadmonishing voice. Hester was a just and careful mother, but his grandmother felt sure that Robin must miss the ardent, playful improvisation and gaiety that had shone about his father's childhood.

'How perfectly delightful of you, my dear!' Thus she heard herself greet Hester and felt the sane machinery of life close round and sustain her. Hester was kissing her cheek, she was kissing Hester's. 'And you walked from the station in all this downpour! — Well, Robin darling.'

'We were prepared for the rain, and we enjoy it, don't we, Robin?' said Hester. 'Robin was delighted to come. He is always glad to have tea with his Grannie.'

Set upon the background of her dark reminiscences, this remark showed Monica something of

which she had not till then been aware. Hester was changed since that day of their first meeting. She was as assured, as competent as ever, but she was certainly kinder. Something of her repellent manner on the first day might be set down to girlish awkwardness, and perhaps, in spite of the assurance, she had really been a little frightened. It was possible, if difficult, to believe it.

'May I see the goldfish?' said Robin. He was dressed in a little suit of green. Monica did not think it became him. Clive, she had always dressed in blue or white.

'You may; but let me have a look at you first; the goldfish will wait.' She drew him to her side while Hester leaned to the fire and held out her hands to the blaze. She had taken off the boots in the hall and showed slender legs and low-heeled shoes; her dark coat and skirt, sparse and formal, gave her again the boyish air, though there was nothing really masculine in Hester's demeanour. Mingling with the terse competency, Monica felt always an undertone, repellent to her, of something soft and smouldering, and over Robin's head she cast an oblique glance of the old distaste at her daughter-in-law's nonchalant form.

'Why doesn't our room turn round like this,

Mummy?' said Robin. He leaned against his grandmother's knee and looked about him. 'I like it. You can't tell what's on the other side, down the steps.'

'I think I can,' said Hester. Her reasonableness was only just not a snub and for a moment Robin was checked by it; but he took up after a moment: 'Not if you didn't know already. If you didn't know already, there might be robbers down there; or tigers; — or just a kitten asleep on a cushion.' His fancy as it took substance widened his gaze.

'Well, I shouldn't care for robbers in my drawing-room, or tigers either and you'd be the first to be frightened by them if they were there,' Hester rejoined, turning her head to measure her child with a scientific eye as though hidden meanings might lurk in these images.

'But they wouldn't really be there,' Robin rejoined, quite as reasonably as his mother, and without her dryness. 'That's what's so nice; Grannie might have changed everything and one wouldn't know. — I do like this room, Grannie,' he repeated. 'It's like that queer room on the ship you took me to.'

Monica's one remaining brother was an Indian judge and Robin had gone with her to see him off

that spring. 'It *is* rather like the saloon of a ship, with the windows all round and the low ceiling,' she said. 'And with such a quantity of rain outside one might fancy oneself on the waves!'

'I should call this the cosiest of suburban rooms and anything more dismal than the saloon of a ship I can't conceive of!' laughed Hester, taking out her cigarette, while Robin, feeling her not at all in the game, whispered to his grandmother: 'Perhaps there's a whale round the corner that's been washed on deck.'

'Let's go see!' she said. Hester no more understood a child's mind than she understood the drawing-room, which was neither cosy nor suburban. She was glad she did not; glad that Robin whispered. She took him by the hand and led him off and as they turned the corner and went down the steps it seemed to her that she and Robin escaped into fairyland leaving Hester behind them. Tranquil, pale, the rain-swept hedgerow elms outside making it the quieter, the lower room received them as though with a gentle finger laid on its lips, and in their bowl on the lacquer table the goldfish glanced and glittered, living so determinedly their mysterious, circumscribed life. Robin stopped short on seeing them. 'It's not a whale: — it's

goldfish,' he whispered, turning up to her a face Clive's to exactitude in its wistful archness. She stooped and kissed the starry forehead. She felt her love passionately flow over the little boy, sweeping him and Clive together in its tide, the past and the present. 'Much prettier than a whale and much easier to take care of,' she said.

'*Could* you take care of a whale?' Robin questioned, still with the archness that showed his recognition of fairyland and its code.

'Not very well in here; — but you might in the garden — on such a rainy day as this the poor thing would hardly miss the sea!' laughed Monica.

'But I like these better. There are no whales at the Zoo. There wouldn't be room for them. — They'd reach out into the lane if they were in the garden, Grannie; you couldn't keep them there.' And as, absorbed now in reality he stood beside her, he added: 'Don't you think they have dear little faces? They look so happy as they go round and round and they open and shut their mouths as though they were singing.'

'If you ask me, I always think they are melancholy mad,' said Hester's voice, devastatingly. She had come to the steps and stood there above them, her cigarette in her hand, looking down. 'I

don't like to see them going round and round. Their cheerfulness doesn't deceive me.'

Monica felt something of a shock as she heard these words. It was almost as though Hester were reading her thoughts of an hour ago. 'Aren't even the fish to be spared psycho-analysis?' she asked.

'Well, since they are *all* repression, I think we need hardly waste our time on them! They offer no problem!' Hester returned with a slight laugh. 'They are melancholy mad, poor things — as anything shut up with nothing whatever to do must be. I do hate to see animals shut up.' She tossed the end of her cigarette into one of Monica's Chinese bowls, took out another, tapped it against the back of her hand and lighted it as she stood there.

'If you can call them shut up,' said Monica. Robin had drawn close to her and was gazing, very earnestly now, at the ambiguous fish.

'They are as shut up as the lions at the Zoo, and those always make me feel sick,' said Hester, turning away.

Monica and the child stood in a stillness curiously shared.

'Are they really unhappy, do you think?' Robin asked, whispering again.

'Not one bit, darling,' she assured him — though

not herself. 'They have been here for three years and get bigger and fatter all the time. They would pine if they were unhappy.'

'But why does Mummy think they're unhappy? — Could they make a noise to say if they were?'

'No: they couldn't make a noise — but they could move slowly and look dull; — that's the way a fish would show unhappiness; — and not care to eat ants' eggs. — They had a splendid feed of ants' eggs only a little while ago and you should have seen them snap them up.'

Still Robin leaned against her and still he gazed at the fish. 'But I sometimes eat my tea when I'm very unhappy,' he said in the lowest voice. He trusted her completely; he was hers completely; he would never have said it to his mother — or why the lowered voice? For a moment the selfish joy of her proved possessorship filled her heart, then drew away to give place to apprehension. 'Unhappy? Are you unhappy, darling? Why? Tell me why,' she said and looking up at her with Clive's eyes he said, faltering a little, 'I don't know.'

'That's enough about the fish. — Don't let Robin get sentimental about them,' called Hester from above with kindly peremptoriness. 'I've something to tell you, Monica.' She had always, from the

beginning, called her mother-in-law by her Christian name, expressing to Monica's ear indifference rather than intimacy.

Holding Robin very tightly by the hand, wondering, as she came, about acquired and innate instincts and their inheritance; wondering whether a seed of Clive's dark time had drifted into the soul of his son — Monica obeyed the summons, drawing Robin to her knee as she took her chair near the fireplace and looked up at her daughter-in-law. As a little boy, Clive, too, had known moods, she remembered, of grief and panic. But she had been there to shield and soothe and understand. He did not hide from her when he was a little boy; as Robin — she felt sure of it — would hide from Hester.

'I've something to tell you, that will please you,' Hester was repeating. She had taken up her position again at the fireplace, but now she leaned back against the mantelpiece, raising her cigarette to her lips, drawing at it, then holding it off as if for scrutiny, her eyes half closed, her brows slightly knitted. She looked at her cigarette as if its taste disappointed her; — Monica had often noted the trick. She had never seen anyone smoke so constantly and with so little air of relish.

'It's a very important decision Clive and I have

come to,' Hester went on, 'mainly because of you — but because of ourselves as well. We are tired of London in some ways. I don't think it's very good for Robin, or for Clive either. He still gets those horrid headaches from time to time. — And since last spring we've had our eye on The Crofts — the cottage on the hill, you know, under the wood: — and now we've bought it. — Yes, actually. — I thought you'd be pleased. We have been very crafty about it all and said nothing to you lest it should fall through and you should be disappointed. — There's been the London house to get rid of and endless documents to seal and sign. But it's all done now in law and order, and you won't be lonely any more.' And Hester benevolently surveyed her, very much, it flashed over Monica, as she might have surveyed the goldfish, released and making off down stream. She saw the picture of the hurrying fish, golden and glad, and for a moment felt their astonished gladness in herself, before she felt a deep drop of dread. It was not Clive coming back; it was Hester. She had run away; to be safe; to keep safe with Clive; to hide from Clive; and now Hester followed her. No; the goldfish were not released; they were drawn out of their safe retreat in a net.

'My dear — what wonderful news,' she said slowly, looking down at Robin's head.

'It *is* rather, isn't it? We are rather proud of ourselves. Even Robin didn't know.' Hester tapped her cigarette against the mantelpiece and again frowned at the tip. 'You are coming to live near Grannie, Robin; isn't that rather jolly?'

Robin, making no reply, turned his eyes up to his grandmother. It was as though he felt all the unuttered things in her, all the things Hester would never feel.

'Isn't it wonderful; you can see the goldfish every day,' she said to him softly. She wanted horribly to cry; to be alone so that she could think.

'Not if they're unhappy,' said Robin, gazing at her. 'Not if they're going to die.'

'But they're not going to die. Why should they die? We'll make a little pond for them — since Mummy thinks they're unhappy in the bowl — and have a fountain to play over them. Wouldn't you like a fountain to play with? Like the princess, with the three golden balls?'

Robin's eyes still studied her. 'But Jeremy died,' he said. 'And he was very happy. — Is it true that he'll never, never come back — however much we want him?'

'When things are dead they never come back, Robin; I've told you that already.' Hester checked the sentimental tendency with decision. 'It's very kind of Grannie to say she'll make you a pond and a fountain to play with, and the fish will love it, of course. Jeremy died because he was old and when things are old it's much better they should go to sleep. He had a very happy life and went to sleep. It's silly, you know, to go on thinking about things that can't be helped. Think of all the nice things that are going to happen instead. You are to have a garden of your own, as well as Grannie's, and if you like you shall have a dog just like Jeremy.'

Robin sat, very straight, on his grandmother's knee, his eyes downcast, his little face firmly set, and Monica saw that he was frightened.

'It's such a nice garden, The Crofts's,' she said, diverting Hester's attention from Robin's case, shielding him, giving him time — with Clive she had always known that it was merely a question of gently giving him time. — 'They have done some very funny things to it — the good people who lived there — but it's charmingly placed under the hill and almost anything could be made of it. — You are quite sure it won't tire Clive to go up and

down every day — or cut you off too much from all your London occupations?'

'Not a bit more tiring than it is to get from Chelsea to the city; and we shall be able to afford a car now that will take us to the station in ten minutes. He will have tennis here, and he loves that so, and I shall manage perfectly; — but, you know, we were thinking of you even more than of ourselves. We didn't like to think of you all alone down here.' Hester wanted to make it clear. It was the second time she had said it.

'I know. It's too dear of you both. How soon will you move in?'

'We think we can manage in six weeks' time; by the end of September. Eddie and I and Marcia Jessup are coming down on Saturday to go over the rooms and Beppo Gales, too, perhaps. He says he'll decorate the dining-room for us if it's a possible shape. — We'll call for you, shall we? — and have tea here afterwards.'

'Beppo' Gales was a young painter whose fame, in Monica's eyes, rested upon impudence rather than achievement. He dealt with the human form singularly displayed and distorted and had been one of the young people on the stairs who had called Clive the cigarette-holder. Grievous to think that

he was to decorate Clive's dining-room and that to the end of her days she must see, at every meal she partook of at The Crofts, visageless, vast-thighed forms bearing grisly fruits and flowers on their heads. 'That will be delightful,' she murmured.

'It will be nice for Celia, too, our coming, won't it?' said Hester.

The tea-table was now placed before Monica and she still kept Robin on her lap, saying to him as she warmed the tea-pot: 'Will you measure in the tea for me, Robin?' Robin, she knew, had been on the verge of tears but was now master of himself.

'Clive can take her and Miss what's-her-name out in the car for drives,' Hester went on. 'There's no risk of infection now for Robin, is there?'

'Not the least.' Monica heard that she spoke dryly. 'Her lung healed before she left Switzerland. — Clive mustn't have her on his mind. Norah Unwin has an uncle coming to stay who has a car. He is looking for a place here, too.'

'Oh, well; in that case Clive can certainly have her much less on his mind. He was very much upset by her breakdown. He's so fond of her, you know. Lucky we got The Crofts in time if there's a competitor in the field.'

'He wants to rent, not to buy, I gather. He was thinking of the Old Manor Farm, Norah said.'

'Well, we certainly shouldn't have competed with him for *that*. It's a dismal place,' said Hester. 'Now drink your milk and eat your bread-and-butter, Robin. — We've not much time before our train and you mustn't be late for bed.'

CHAPTER IV

BUT why had it been Hester to come with the news? Why not Clive? This question, which had lain latent in Monica's mind during Hester's visit, rose to assail her during the long night, as she lay awake and listened to the rain. Such news as that should have been brought by Clive. He had sold the little Chelsea house that she had given him. She had given it to him; — not to Hester. It was their transaction, his and hers; not hers and Hester's; and it could be only Hester who had made it so; thrusting herself, with her bland assurance, between them.

'She is straight,' that phrase of Celia's returned to her pleadingly while her thoughts burned and brooded on her wound. But was Hester straight? Was there not some surreptitious motive smouldering under the fair appearance of her? She was hounded by the memory of her walking away in the garden below the flat, leading Clive out of her life, her hand stayed on the hem of his coat. Now she was leading him back, a trophy; placing him there, tormentingly near but never to be reached except on Hester's terms. And Hester

seemed to smile ominously behind him and to say: 'Hate me as much as you like: — but touch me at your peril.'

'But I don't hate you; you are straight; you mean to be kind; I don't hate you,' she felt herself repeating exorcisingly. And at last a merciful cloud covered her mind and she fell asleep.

On waking she found herself thinking of Celia. Her thoughts of Hester had run themselves dry and the obsessions of the night survived only in her sense of weight and weariness. It was Celia she must think of now, and Celia could hardly rejoice at the news she had to tell her. It was news that had best be broken carefully. So, after her orders were given, her letters written, she put on her hat and coat and took a stick and went out, remembering as she always remembered on starting on a walk, that Jeremy was not here to share it.

The rain had ceased but the day was blanketed in a thick mist that might, later on, lift and reveal a summer sky. Monica's spirits revived a little as she walked, her feet slipping in mud, the hedgerow trees pattering down drops on her shoulders. The weight was there, and the sense of it was like a tendency to sickness underlying her vigour, but she had an eye for what the day could give and found a

certain charm in the restricted world, seeing herself as a Noah's Ark figure set on her little circle of green, the circle moving with her as she went. There was beauty, too; the glossy branches of the oaks above were like those she had seen carved in deep relief on a dark, mysteriously lovely old door in Bourges; in Norah's field an arabesque of hens were scattered like a spray of white chrysanthemums in a Chinese picture, and at the door the old-fashioned little banksia rose, sweet and apricot coloured, reminded her of her girlhood; one hardly ever saw these roses nowadays, and she nipped one off, shook out the rain that clogged its tiny petals and, while she waited for Bowditt, bent her face absently to its fragrance, a deep, almost a crafty fragrance, overwhelming her in memories of Aunt Janet and of Lockers, the old Sussex house under the Downs where she and her brothers and sisters, she and Clive, had spent so many happy holidays.

She saw Clive and Celia, the slender boy and girl — Celia, too, was related to Aunt Janet — playing tennis on the lawn while the downs grew grave and purple above the garden and Aunt Janet's white cap appeared at the French window summoning them all in to dress for dinner. The roses grew against the wall round the window and she herself

was sitting there on the gravel path, her book on her knee, her thoughts busy with ways and means, a harassed but happy woman. Little Jemima, Jeremy's mother, sat beside her, watching the players with a dog's disinterested melancholy. Monica was far, far away, deep in the fragrance of the banksia rose when Bowditt came to let her in.

Bowditt had been Celia's nurse, then her maid, and now with the aid of a village girl she ran the little house for the two friends. She was a gaunt, sad-eyed woman and Monica always felt that she held her in some way responsible for the devastation of her young mistress's life. All the same, under the resentment, if that it were, she knew that she could rely upon a fundamental sympathy in Bowditt, for she and Bowditt both cherished Celia.

'Is Miss Celia in the drawing-room?' she asked.

'She's gone out, to Chelmsford, with Captain Ingpen,' said Bowditt surprisingly and with evident satisfaction. 'Captain Ingpen said he would do some shopping for us, and Miss Norah thought the drive would do Miss Celia good.'

Monica now observed the various masculine belongings that altered the aspect of the apple-green little entry. A faded silk scarf, russet striped with grey, lay on the table beside the salver of visiting

cards; golf clubs leant beside the umbrella-stand, and a curious square box, with brass corners and a brass handle in the lid, stood near the foot of the stairs. She even savoured a new odour on the air; leather? tweed? tobacco? and something added; — or was it merely her fancy that added it? — something faintly yet sharply reminiscent of years ago in India; an aromatic, bitter whiff. She had hated India; she turned her thoughts away from it now as the pain of an old self-reproach visited her heart. She had been the romance, the delight of her young husband's life, yet she knew that she had not made him happy during the two years they had spent together. She had loved Charlie, but she had hated India and hated his acceptance of the life she found so unbearable in its formulas of empty gaiety, its heavy idle days and convivial nights. It had revealed her to herself as a rebel, a bohemian. In her girlhood's home they had questioned everything; in Charlie's India they questioned nothing.

'Miss Norah's uncle has come then?' she said.

'He came last night, Ma'am, unexpectedly. They had a wire from Dover to say. It wasn't till Saturday they had been looking for him. You will see Miss Norah, Ma'am? She is just gathering the eggs.'

'Don't call her. I will wait till she comes in,' said Monica, and Bowditt showed her into the drawing-room.

Celia's drawing-room was china-blue and white and grey, with touches of lemon colour in the Iceland poppies set upon the mantelpiece and of black in the cushions and picture frames. Monica went to the fireplace where, because of Celia, a little knot of flame glimmered pleasantly, and looked about her, seeing her own figure reflected in the old French mirror on the other side of the room, a thickened yet youthful form in pleated short grey skirt, short jacket, and black straw hat with a velvet bow. Her figure went with the room and it seemed to her that the room belonged more to her own past than to Celia's. The mezzotints from Reynolds and Gainsborough had been given to Celia's father and mother as a wedding-gift from her parents. She remembered the delicate Chippendale chairs in Celia's grandmother's drawing-room and playing as a child round the old Chesterfield, now covered in blue and white cretonne. This was the sort of room she understood and loved; that understood and loved her: here she was herself, her petals all unfolded.

Norah came trudging in almost at once, drawing off her muddy gloves, a pleasant-faced young wo-

man, ruddy, with prominent teeth and blue eyes. She was the daughter of a country parson — as Hester was. Monica had never seen, or heard of Hester's father since her relegating allusion to him on the day when the Registrar's Office was announced; and the fact that Hester had cast him off did not make him seem more obscure.

'Hello! How jolly of you to come! You have heard of our excitements. Celia carried off already.'

'Just what Celia needs. She and your uncle have taken to each other, have they?'

'I don't know about that; but he doesn't frighten her and that disposes him to kindness, I think. He rather frightens *me*.'

'Is he old and sunburnt and crabbed? Has he always lived in India? I really know nothing about your uncle, Norah.'

'He's sunburned all right; extraordinarily brown; but not crabbed exactly, or old either; younger than you are I expect, Mrs. Wilmott. He is my mother's youngest brother. Yes, he has spent most of his life in India; among queer warrior tribes in wild places.'

'On the Afghan frontier? Soldiering, do you mean?'

'Not soldiering so much as studying; discovering;

— their languages, customs, religions. He's lived among them in disguise; seen the sheep sacrificed and worshipped it with them afterwards — or whatever it is they do. I really don't know him a bit, but I know his life has been frightfully hairbreadth and exciting. And because of all his special knowledge he was very useful during the war. He is rather an impressive sort of person, but, if you ask me, he has a way of looking at us which makes me feel as if he saw me as a hen and Celia as a kitten. — Not but what he is kind enough to hens and kittens.'

Norah, laughing and good-humoured, was plumping up a cushion here, emptying an ash tray there. 'See what a state he is getting our room into already,' she said. 'He took all the hot water in the bath this morning.'

'How long will you have this inconsiderate person quartered upon you?'

'Oh, he's safely in London till the Manor Farm is ready for him. He's going to make me useful and help him to furnish it I see. But that will be rather fun and he's willing to be useful to us, too. It's really very decent his offering to do our shopping this morning, and it *is* good for Celia to see outside people. It's a quiet life here for her, isn't it, after the life she was used to in London?'

The allusion gave Monica her entry. 'Yes, it is, but I always feel that Celia is far more country than I am. I am an old Cockney at heart and to me the quiet is almost suffocating sometimes.'

Norah's face fell; she was aware of an approaching announcement. 'Don't tell me you are thinking of going back to London? I don't see how Celia could get on without you and her music.'

'Going back? No indeed. But London is coming to me. That's my news, Norah. I wanted to tell you and Celia at once. Clive and Hester have been feeling that I must be lonely and they are coming down to be near me. They have bought The Crofts. They will be here in six weeks' time.'

Norah, sitting on the sofa opposite, stared at her, and slowly the astonishment on her face gave way to reprobation.

'They are coming to live here? All the year round?'

'Yes. They are giving up London.'

Norah gazed heavily. 'Why did they keep it dark?'

It was an unpleasant echo of her own thought, but Monica had her reply, and Hester's, ready.

'They wanted to be sure. And they wanted to surprise me. Hester told me only yesterday. You

do see — don't you, Norah — that it will be rather wonderful for me.'

'Yes; of course it will,' said Norah slowly. 'It's only about Celia that I am thinking.'

'Well, I am too. Do you think, after all this time, that it will in any way be difficult for her?'

'It's bound to bring it all back, isn't it,' said Norah; 'seeing him all the time and seeing that he has forgotten her, in every way; as only men can forget. — Forgive me, Mrs. Wilmott; I do like Clive most awfully; I always have, even when I saw that he was breaking Celia's heart; but it's true, isn't it?'

'He hasn't forgotten, Norah, it's only that marriage crowds friendships so completely out of a man's life, and what I hope for now is that he will remember enough for things to be happy again. After all they were really like brother and sister; — he will remember back to that happy time.'

'It would be frightfully hard lines if he remembered the time that wasn't happy. It would be frightfully hard lines for Celia if he remembered enough to be sorry for her. Celia, though she looks such a wisp, is the bravest creature in the world and couldn't help it if a microbe *did* get into her lungs.'

'She's so brave that no one could be sorry for her. — You mean it will be a strain for her — showing

them that she *is* brave?' Monica got up restlessly. 'After all, Norah, nobody knew except you and me and Bowditt.'

'Hester knew all right,' said Norah with a short laugh. 'And she knows that you wanted him to marry Celia and that you are sorry he didn't.'

'My dear Norah!' Monica gazed at her. 'Do I make it so plain?' she asked.

'How can you help making it plain? One only has to see them all together — with you. Hester isn't our sort, is she?'

Monica walked to a window as she heard this question. 'She's my son's wife. That's all I have to remember,' she said, standing there looking out and wondering, if Norah had seen, how much Clive must have seen.

'Yes, she's his wife and he's devoted to her; but the queer thing is that if she'd been a man he wouldn't have made a friend of her. Celia would have been a friend, always; but not Hester. That's just the difference, isn't it? That's just where this queer falling in love comes in; but I can't help feeling that it's happier when a man falls in love with a friend; they do sometimes.'

'I wonder.' Monica stood looking out. 'Perhaps difference and the surprise of difference are needed

for falling in love. It's a different kind of affinity. — Here they are, Norah. — Celia is looking amused — and surprised.'

'Celia shan't fall in love with Uncle Godfrey; — I can promise you that,' said Norah; 'and he won't fall in love with her. It's not her kind of difference that would attract him. He has no taste for paradise,' and Norah laughed with a certain grimness as she followed Monica out into the hall.

A car, spattered with mud, stood before the door and a gaunt, heavily built man, with close-cropped hair, was holding out a hand for Celia to descend. No, Captain Ingpen had no taste for paradise, Monica in a swift glance at him agreed, feeling something a little brutal in his air of nonchalant kindness. Celia was more a disembodied spirit than a pretty woman and Captain Ingpen's taste would be for pretty women. Again he recalled India and the men there, who were too stupid, or too busy, to care for anything but pretty women.

Celia might not be pretty in the Indian sense, but she was the loveliest creature, and all her little foibles were dear to Monica; her breathless way of laughing, her gay yet melancholy inconsequence, even her tendency to make rather pointless jokes when she was shy. There was something arctic in

her tints — blue and white and gold — but she did not look ill, only fragile and flower-like; forget-me-nots and cowslips growing strangely in fields of snow.

'But Monica — you're not going!' she said, coming to embrace her friend. Celia's devotion always gave Monica a sense of establishment, security, in a world of change. She had always been part of Celia's world and Celia understood her, better, she sometimes suspected, than she understood herself; or perhaps it would be truer to say that she knew of herself the evil of which she was capable and Celia the good. It was reconstructing to be with anyone who saw the good — sometimes when one had forgotten it oneself — and her eyes dwelt fondly on the girl as she said: 'I only ran in for a moment — I must be back by twelve; Mrs. Fellows is coming to see me about the nursing committee. — How well you look, my darling. — Did you enjoy your drive?'

'Ever so much. — I never knew anyone drive so fast as Captain Ingpen. He was trying to frighten me, I believe; — but I wasn't frightened. I liked it!' laughed Celia. She was seldom shy nowadays and Monica sometimes grieved over this as a sign that girlhood was over. — She was not in the least shy now.

'This is Norah's uncle,' she said presenting him, and Monica found Captain Ingpen's eyes on her; light yet hot blue eyes — burned looking, with a straight line of upper lid — that showed oddly in his dark face. His stare might express surprise, discomposure, or admiration, and since so many things to-day reminded her of the past, she now found Captain Ingpen's eyes reminding her of pursuing suitors. Yes, it was unmistakable, though it had been so long since she had seen it, that arrested, appraising look in a man's eye; a tribute to her sex that, she reflected ironically as she walked away, would never have been elicited had not her close little hat, her upturned collar, so framed her countenance as to lend it a misleadingly youthful aspect.

CHAPTER V

ANYONE looking at Clive — anyone with a discerning eye — would have said that unless he were a soldier he might well be a poet. So his mother thought, as she had often thought, on that Saturday afternoon when, drawing her hand within his arm, he led her away from The Crofts, where Hester and her friends still computed and measured. He carried himself like a soldier — that was his inheritance from Charlie, and the little twist that his injured thigh had given to his gait lent it a jauntiness that added to rather than detracted from the resolute blitheness of his bearing. Objectivity was a soldierly quality and Clive's expression — so much more aware of you than of himself — was objective. And with these disciplined and valiant characteristics went the almost unearthly beauty; eyes bright as clear grey water; hair swept to silver-gilt ripples, like a young archangel's; a head with its fragile, forcible structure, to be bound by the laurels of a Greek fillet or bend from a background of swift, beneficent pinions. Yes; a beneficent archangel; but an archangel bearing a sword. There was something about Clive that frightened her a little at moments.

He never yielded to inner, or to outer, pressure. He could break; but he would not yield.

'I must see you alone, Mummy darling,' he had said. They had had no word alone as yet. She had been called for and borne off to The Crofts and so elated had he been with the success of their exploit, so glad in her imagined gladness, that no shadow of her anxiety must be allowed to reach his consciousness. There had been, for her, too, a certain exhilaration in thus taking possession of the new home and looking out from the comfortable windows at the views which were now to frame his existence; and even Hester's friends she had found less annoying than usual. Never, indeed, had she heard anyone talk so swiftly and so vehemently as Mr. Gales. He was like a stout weathercock in a summer storm, veering, glittering, challenging the elements, with never a suspicion that anyone could find him anything but bewitching. But he had altered much in his demeanour towards Clive since that far-away evening of the party. Without pressure, without consciousness, she felt that Clive had mastered all the elements of Hester's world. He did not withdraw and he did not mingle, but they were all aware of him; and to her they were very kind, even when they bustled her aside and

forgot her presence. A young woman whom they called Oriana, who had come, unannounced, with Mr. Gales, offered her chocolates with the greatest affability.

'Let's go round by the hill, Mummy,' said Clive. 'It's so jolly up there; the hill is the best part of The Crofts. — You're not too tired with all the chatter?' Drawing her hand within his arm he bent his head to smile at her.

'Not a bit too tired. Rather stimulating, I found it. It does one good to be made aware of all this new life.'

'Yes; I suppose it does. There's no harm in them,' said Clive, still looking at her and smiling a little absently while, from the gate of The Crofts, they turned up the smooth, turfed hill where a flock of sheep raised tranquil heads to see them pass.

It was a hot August day, but the wind blew freshly and the blue distances fell below them, spreading and receding into the ample, happy view. They paused to look down at it and as they turned again to the ascent, Clive said suddenly: 'You *are* pleased, aren't you, Mummy?'

She knew then that this had been the question underlying all his gladness and that he had been longing to ask it; that it was in order to ask it that

he had led her away, and in feeling him thus dependent on her happiness her fears and darknesses seemed to melt away into the encompassing sunlight. 'Pleased! How should I not be pleased?' she said. She clasped her hands on his arm and offered him a radiant countenance.

Clive walked beside her, looking down at her, sounding her radiance as it were; and for the first time to-day she was aware of an uncertainty in his. But there had always, since the war, been uncertainty in any radiance of Clive's and even as she looked at him she saw anew all that Hester had done for him; all the things that a mother could never do. There was still the cold, attentive gravity at the bottom of his gaze, as though he watched for something; but the strain and lassitude were gone. He was deeply rooted in life, in the life that Hester had made for him; and she felt, in seeing it, for all the pain of her own abdication, a pang of deep, impersonal joy. Hester had given him back his manhood.

'Well, that is what we thought; that is what we wanted; — more than anything; — to please you,' Clive said. 'I was never satisfied about your being here, all alone. From the first I hated your going off to live by yourself in the country.'

'Did you, dearest? I never guessed that.'

Clive was still smiling but now she saw that he lifted his eyebrows and opened his eyes widely. 'Did you really think that I felt it natural — our being separated — after having spent all our lives together?' he asked.

It was the first time he had asked such a question; he asked it now when five years had passed. Did he not know that they had been separated for more than five years? Time collapsed suddenly; Clive was suddenly near her again, so near that it was as though she held him against her heart. Had he really suffered too? The weight upon her heart seemed his suffering as well as her own.

'But, darling child,' she said, carefully, seeking her words; — 'it was the most natural thing in the world. It is what must happen, when a man marries and makes his home; — it is what must happen — to mothers.'

'Not to a mother like you. Not when people have been as much to each other as you and I. For a time I hardly took it in; you seemed so sure of its being the right thing, and so contented. And then, little by little, it became more of a grief, a mystery. — And when Jeremy died ——' Clive stopped.

'When Jeremy died?' she repeated. 'Yes? What had that to do with it, Clive?'

'Why — to see that you were quite alone; not a bit of the old life left to you. — *Have* you been contented; — living without me, like this?'

She steadied her thoughts and voice. 'Well — hardly contented, Clive; except as mothers must learn to be; in your happiness.'

'But how could I be happy if you weren't!' said Clive. He had turned his eyes away from her.

Strange paradox of the human heart, showing its frailty! A moment before she had felt the pang of joy in the thought of his happiness; but was it not now a deeper joy to know that he, too, had suffered? She could find no word to say to him; no word that might not flaw the beautiful, the precarious moment. She felt herself cherishing it, and the assurance it brought her, as though it were a gift of something warm, living and fragile that Clive had put into her hands. It was their life; their own shared life; known by nobody else; that she had thought dead. It lived; and he had given it back to her. She heard herself saying to herself, deep down under everything: 'This is one of those moments when it would be good to die': and then, suddenly, as they reached the summit of the hill and stood there, looking away in the sunlight, everything was shattered; for Clive was saying, with a breathlessness that, she now

recognized, had underlain all his urgency: 'And it was just what Hester did see, Mummy. — That you must be missing me and that I couldn't be really happy with you buried down here. It was all Hester's idea, every bit of it. I'd never have thought it possible to sell the house and uproot ourselves like this and put it through so that you shouldn't find out and stop us. It was Hester who did it all. She is like that when she makes up her mind to a thing. Nothing stops her. That was why I wanted her to be the one to tell you; — so that you should understand.'

Hester. It was Hester's idea; or rather — for she did indeed understand — Hester had made him believe it hers. He loved her, no doubt; he had, no doubt, suffered in the thought of her loneliness — with even Jeremy gone; but it was not of her, it was of Hester, he was thinking; and what he was really longing for was that she should see and acknowledge and love Hester. He had sent Hester so that she might gain the full credit for her insight and generosity. Dust. Dust and ashes. The bright afternoon shrank to a shrivelled snake-skin before Monica's eyes.

'How dear of Hester!' she said. Instinct upheld her. She found the fitting words. She kept her

clasp steady on his arm and smiled, looking before her.

'I do hope,' she said presently, for Clive said nothing and the pause that fell between them became perceptible, 'that it is not a real sacrifice to you both; I hope you are not doing it only on my account.'

Clive already felt the change in her. How should he not? What availed the sweetest words if the voice that spoke them went to a different tune? And how banish the stiffened rhythm when the night thoughts that had come to her after Hester's visit pressed in upon her and she saw them all — all fulfilled? She had run away from Hester, and Hester followed her, with generous hands outstretched. Hester accepted her and it remained for her now to accept Hester. That was what it all came to. It was a contest between her and Hester in which she was worsted beforehand; since it was Hester who possessed Clive and was in no peril of losing him. She remembered now the long glance that she had cast upon them as he led her away. It had all been rehearsed between them; all arranged, so that Hester should have the full credit of her magnanimity.

'Sacrifice?' Clive repeated the word a long time after she had spoken it, as though he had been

weighing it and found it heavy. 'Sacrifice, Mummy? There's no question of that. I must have blundered badly to lead you to think that. Who wants a sacrifice made for them?'

Who indeed? 'I only meant that it is so much to accept from your young lives. — I must be very worthy of it.' Monica spoke as carefully as though picking her way amidst hot ploughshares.

'Worthy! Don't, Mummy!'

They had begun to walk, rapidly, down the hill.

'But that really is the word, Clive. You show me how much it is the word. You show me how wonderful Hester has been in it all. I must be worthy of her; that is what I mean.'

Yes; she must heap Hester with garlands, lest he should guess at her ingratitude. But she saw as she walked so swiftly beside him and heard the heavy beating of her heart that her bitterness had betrayed her. She had shown Clive to himself as asking something of her instead of giving her something. She had spoiled everything for him, as he had for her: but it was a mother's part to hide from him what he had done and she had failed to hide it. Everything was spoiled, unless she could find at once an issue, and summoning all her resource, all her strength and strategy, she went on: 'You know, London means a

great deal more to Hester than it does to you, Clive. You care for all sorts of things that you will get here in the country; tennis and birds and gardening; while Hester is a typical London girl — as typical as I used to be; only I have drained my London cup and she is in the middle of hers. It *is* wonderful of her, Clive, and perhaps I realize how wonderful more than you do; and I own, darling, that it troubles me lest you have not counted the cost of it to her.'

Had she succeeded? She listened to the specious, the perfidious note of her own voice after it had ceased and wondered if Clive had not heard it too. She gagged and pinioned and laid herself at Hester's feet, as he had forced her to do; and could she really make him believe that she relished the position?

'But she isn't giving up London, Mummy,' he said. Gravely, his eyes turned from her, he accepted her words at their face value. 'Not in any way that would mean such cost to her. I did count it all, I promise you, and I wouldn't have accepted it from her if it had meant the loss of her London life. But that's the good fortune of your being so near. She can go up to town every day if she likes, and have her friends with her constantly. Gales will be com-

ing twice a week, you see, to paint the dining-room; — it's as easy for him as if we were living in Chelsea. And Hester is arranging to give a course of lectures this autumn.'

'Splendid. That is splendid. If it's really so. If Hester hasn't deceived you about it in her wish to make us happy. — But I will take your word for it, dearest. What are the lectures to be about? Excellent, that Hester should be taking up her own work again.'

She must indeed go carefully. Clive knew that she had not cared for the small book on infant psychology that Hester had published in the second year of their marriage. It had been easier, when one saw such theories connected in all their abstract brutality with the dawning life of little Robin, to smile at them than to resent them; and in order that she should not show resentment, she had smiled. Clive must have seen her smile. They had never spoken of the book.

'Oh, her special line, you know. — The modern emancipation of women; psycho-analysis; all that sort of thing.' His voice was guarded.

'Does she feel the emancipation accomplished? — or is there even more to do?'

'A very great deal more to do; the acceptance of

equal standards, all along the line, is only tacit as yet, isn't it?'

'Can we hope for more than a tacit acceptance, I wonder?' She tried to attain the tone of blithe detachment with which she and Clive, in the old days, would have discussed such themes. 'Women are so handicapped by nature that it's difficult to imagine a time when equal standards wouldn't be really an injury to them. — Where is she to give the lectures? I might be able to go up for them?' She must go on talking; but Clive would know as well as she did that she had no intention of attending Hester's lectures.

'At Oriana's; — Mrs. Travers's — you know,' said Clive.

They had reached the bottom of the hill and were now following the little path that led out to the Green. How terse was Clive's voice. Hester was there between them. Monica seemed to see her eyes following them, and now with reprobation.

'Oh, is that little creature married? She looks such a child — with her bright doll face. I imagined that she and Mr. Gales were engaged.'

Clive paused for a moment and then with a resolution not hidden from his mother's ear, answered: 'She's left her husband and she and Gales live to-

gether. They are modern, artistic people, you know, and don't believe in marriage. I hope you don't mind their coming. Hester was rather upset when she saw them both, knowing we were to have tea with you.'

'Why, my dear—do you, too, think of me as the prim Victorian dame? Of course I'll give them tea. Why should I mind? I don't mind irregularities in the least. All I mind is people having theories to justify their irregularity.—I don't mind what people do so long as they don't talk about it!' And Monica's laugh, as she found the aphorism, was dry. She was sure that Hester had not been in the least upset and she did mind irregularity.

'They don't talk about it,' said Clive. He never retorted; he only withdrew. She felt now that he withdrew. She had failed. He saw that she was miserable. When one was miserable one could not hide.

In silence they crossed the Green. Looking out with hot eyes from under the brim of her summer hat, Monica felt that she hated the Green; she had never known how much till then. She hated her garden, too, all opened and exposed to view except at the back where the hedge had grown high enough to hide it. She hated the beam and plaster and the

clambering roses. Only when they were inside and the dark coolness of the drawing-room enveloped them, did the flame of hatred die. Here, at all events, was the past. Here she could remember Clive, as he had been, before Hester came. He pulled a chair near the window for her. 'Sit down, Mummy,' he said gently. 'How delicious it is in here.'

'No; you sit down, my dear. We'll have a little more light for our tea-party.' She went to the blinds. She must give herself time to see where she stood. A horrible dread, cold after the fierceness, crept over her. Had she not alienated Clive by her perversity? He must see it as perversity.

'Clive,' she said — a woman when she has shown herself as perverse must not supplicate, yet she knew that under her light tone there was supplication: — 'you and Hester will have to come and spend a great many evenings with me. — Give me an inch, and I'll take an ell, I'm afraid you'll feel! They *have* been rather lonely; — more lonely than I could have realized. And even when you can't come, it will be everything to know that you are hardly a mile away. — I believe that you could almost hear me if I called you from my bedroom window.'

'It will be everything to me, too,' said Clive, still

with his gentleness. 'I've often thought I heard you calling me — since you've been down here. — I've waked up suddenly and answered you. — Yes; — isn't it queer? Perhaps you were thinking of me, Mummy.'

He sat there in his chair, sunken together a little, as though his gallant pose had failed him, and as she saw his smile and how jaded was his face, tears almost mastered her. How she had hurt, how disappointed him! She could have thrown herself in his arms and wept, but that Hester and her friends would soon be upon them.

'Perhaps I was,' she said, moving to the last blind. 'That's very likely, darling.'

Voices were approaching over the Green, Mr. Gales's voice; Mrs. Jessup's. It was fortunate that she had mastered her emotion. Hester and Mr. Gales walked in front. She carried her hat in her hand and the breeze blew back her hair. In her blue linen dress and with something sulky in her demeanour, she had a curiously childlike aspect. Mrs. Jessup, golden hoops swinging against her ochre-coloured cheeks, followed with Mrs. Travers. She was a succulent young woman with glossy black eyes. Mrs. Travers, round-faced and coloured to an apple-blossom pink and white, tripped beside her

on the highest heels, listening with docility to her authoritative contralto.

'Here they come,' said Monica cheerfully. 'I feel specially pleased, Clive, when I see her friends, that Hester doesn't paint her face.'

'But it suits some women, don't you think?' said Clive. He got up with a little stumble of eagerness and came to look beside her. He could be grateful even for a negative tribute to Hester. 'It's rather too hot a day for Marcia's make-up, isn't it? Her mouth seems rather shifted. But Mrs. Travers is very crisp and neat.'

'Yes; and it's an amusing little face, with the straight fringe; like a Chinese baby, rather. Poor little creature. I'm afraid this venture of hers will be an uneasy one. Mr. Gales looks to me very unstable.'

Clive smiled. 'They don't expect stability, I imagine.' He was loyal to them, but he did not identify himself with Hester's friends.

Now they were all in the room, Mr. Gales still talking.

'What a divine room!' he cried, twirling about to look at it. — 'Grandmothers; — great-grandmothers; — Hymns Ancient and Modern; — Mudie's Circulating Library and bridal wreaths — all

the things we've raised such a dust to run away from! here they sit and smile at us!'

'Isn't it cosy,' said Hester. She drew her blue linen sleeve across her forehead.

'Cosy, my dear child! — that's not the word for it! It's balm! — not down! I revel in it! Simply revel!' and snuffing his nostrils, as if assailed by sweet odours, Mr. Gales plunged himself into the deepest chair and then plunged out again as Mrs. Travers, perched at the top of the steps, looked down into the lower room calling out: 'O Beppo — come and see! — Goldfish and black-lacquer and — oh the priceless little water-colours!'

'We shall never look upon their like again,' said Mr. Gales solemnly, gazing down, while Hester, at a little distance, surveyed him with a persistent gloom. 'Hester, my darling, they give me an inspiration: — about that rather degraded little dining-hutch of yours at The Crofts. — I'll paint you a row of Indian jokes; palanquins; elephants; ladies in bustles flirting — *pour le bon motif* — with cavalry officers under the deodars! Kipling, Empire and the Nineties! A wink for every meal! *Cela vous sourit*?'

'Not at all,' said Hester, sitting down at Monica's tea-table. 'I don't like being winked at. Keep to *La Boutique Fantasque* idea. Robin would love that.'

She had not liked the reproof of her 'cosy,' for which Monica could not but feel grateful, though Mr. Gales's encomiums struck her as singularly impudent.

Hester sat opposite her, on a straight chair and was evidently bent on doing her duty by her. 'I'm rather worried about Robin, Monica. He calls out in his sleep. There's some repression, I think, and he cries when I try to get at it. He says he sees Jeremy in a cage. — I suppose that's the goldfish. — You had the same sort of trouble with Vivian, hadn't you, Marcia?'

'There was a definite complex in Vivian's case,' Mrs. Jessup, from the easy chair where she already sat smoking, a magazine on her lap, answered. 'He's always tended to Narcissism; moral scruples and general priggishness when he was little and trying to get religion now at school. He wants to be like Saint Francis, it seems, and say his prayers. He may outgrow it, but it's rather disturbing I own.' Mrs. Jessup did not lift her eyes from her magazine as she thus diagnosed her child. 'Have you seen these pictures of Malcolm's, Beppo? Putrid the way he panders to the public nowadays.'

Mr. Gales sat on the arm of her chair to look while Mrs. Travers, exclaiming that she was

éreintée, extended herself on the sofa, lighting a cigarette.

'Here's Celia, Mummy. Did you know she was coming? How delightful!' Clive, from his place at the window, had stood looking over them all with his cool, aerial gaze, very much to his mother's eye the hovering archangel, uncertain of where, on an ambiguous planet, to place his foot, and as he now left the room she suspected that it was with relief.

'Celia who?' Mrs. Jessup raised her eyes to enquire. 'Will you have any neighbours you can talk to here?'

'Why shouldn't we? If we come here to live, why shouldn't other intelligent people?' Hester rejoined. 'It's Celia Bowen, a very old friend of Clive's. She came to that party when Lionel played — don't you remember? — and he evidently found her more worth talking to than any of us. She plays the violin.' Hester spoke tersely.

'The thin fair girl — who looked like Clive? — But I thought she'd died in Switzerland long ago! How dreadful of me!' exclaimed Mrs. Jessup taking out her lip-stick and equipping her mouth for the new encounter.

'Help my mother-in-law with the tea, Beppo,' said Hester, and Mr. Gales sprang from the arm of

the chair to pass the cups. He was full of goodwill and though she found him impudent Monica did not dislike him.

Celia, facing them all with her gentleness, rather as Clive faced them, made Monica think of Milton's lady confronted with the Comus rout. She belonged with Clive, not with the rout, and did not Hester, whose eyes were on her, feel it? 'But I *have* been here all the time, you know!' she was saying as she entered. Clive had been asking why he so seldom saw her. She was cool and gentle, but surprised, and she said, as she came to kiss her friend and be introduced to the circle: 'I didn't know you had a party, Monica.'

'Do lie down,' said Hester, indicating the sofa from which Mrs. Travers had arisen. 'You must be tired; it's so hot, isn't it?'

It was evident that Hester intended to be kind, thoughtful and efficient, but Celia, who would as soon have thought of taking off her shoes and stockings when she came out to tea as of lying down, laughed a little nervously as she said: 'Thanks so much! — But I'm not a bit tired.'

'Well, Oriana is, at all events,' said Hester, who still stood, rather gauntly, in the middle of the room in her straight blue dress. 'We've had a very tiring

afternoon, up at The Crofts. — What sort of people owned it? Their ideas of decoration were absolutely grisly. — We shall have to scrape it — inside and out — beginning with the rockery!'

'Oh — the rockery! Poor dears! — It was the pride of their lives! They said to me, when they were going: "At all events we are leaving the new people a lovely rockery!"' Celia laughed again, taking the chair that Clive placed for her. 'It is bad, of course; but it has some nice things on it — don't scrape too ruthlessly: — and they were rather dears, and had a darling cat!' Celia was talking with a touch of her headlong girlish manner. Hester confused her a little, and Mr. Gales's cheerfully admiring gaze. 'A yellow Tom, you know,' she said, 'with blue eyes.'

Mrs. Jessup was also surveying her, but not admiringly, seeing in her, Monica imagined, a trivial example of the capitalistic drone. 'A cat? And what have they done with it?' she demanded. 'People who have a stained-glass Romeo and Juliet in their lavatory window might have been capable of turning their cat out to starve, I feel! — I don't need to be told what sort of people they were, Hester!'

'Try some of these cakes, Celia.' Clive placed

himself before her and smiled down upon her as she murmured, disconcerted: 'Turned it out! Why, it was their treasure! They carried it away in a hamper.'

'What do these cakes remind you of, Mummy?' Clive went on, keeping himself between Celia and Mrs. Jessup. 'Do you remember that hot day at Chartres when we stopped at the pastrycook's and bought wonderful cakes for tea — cakes like these — on our way back to the hotel? — Do you remember the ill-tempered *gardien* — and the black kitten we found wandering in the cathedral?'

'What a tribute to my cakes! — Of course I remember.'

'When did you eat the cakes of Chartres, Hester?' Mr. Gales inquired, reclining now above Oriana on the back of the sofa as he fanned her with a newspaper.

'I didn't eat them. It was Clive; long ago. — Some more tea, please, Monica.'

'You and Clive must go some day,' said Monica, filling the cup. 'It's the most beautiful cathedral in the world.'

'We must all four go,' said Clive. 'You and I and Mummy and Celia, Hester. — To think of your never having seen Chartres!'

'But I have seen it.' Hester drank off her tea and rose as she spoke, pushing back her chair. 'During the war. The windows were all muffled up.'

She showed rather flagrantly that Clive's suggestion of a quartette had ruffled her and glancing first at her and then at her son, Monica protested: 'If you've not seen the glass, you've only seen it asleep; with its eyes shut. Clive must take you. You must go again.'

'But I don't want to go again,' said Hester. 'It's the most beautiful cathedral in the world, no doubt, but it's dead and done with; that's what I feel about it. It's like a terrible, beautiful skull, looking away over those endless plains.' She walked to the window and pulled up the blind. 'When is the taxi coming, Clive? Isn't it late already?'

Clive was scanning his wife's averted countenance. Was it really his suggestion about Celia that had so perturbed her? Yet she did not seem angry with Clive; she smiled round and up at him as he joined her at the window and said, laying his hand on her shoulder: 'Not quite time yet. It's hot, isn't it? — I think I could open this a little further — may I, Mummy? — Yes; that's better. Sit in the draught, darling. You're tired.'

'Not a skull, Hester,' Monica sent the arrested

ball rolling again. Mr. Gales, Oriana, and Mrs. Jessup were now bending their heads with wild laughter over some further atrocity discovered in the pages of the magazine and she and Clive and Hester and Celia seemed alone together. 'More like the moon, as one sees it sometimes in daylight, in a blue sky. — Do you remember that we saw Chartres once like that, Clive, coming by train up from Bordeaux? It floated over the plains; from miles away we saw it; it looked transparent, impalpable; it was heavenly rather than terrible.'

Hester seemed to listen absently. She had not taken the chair Clive put for her and still stood looking out of the window. 'Well, the moon *is* a skull,' she said. 'Here is the taxi, Clive.'

For some moments after they were gone Monica and Celia sat in silence. One might have thought that a much larger party had been there, Monica thought, looking slowly about her oddly disordered room, where a pile of magazines sprawled on the floor, the cushions of the sofa lay tossed and cigarette-ends and ash were scattered freely.

'Well, what are you thinking of them?' she enquired, looking across at Celia with an ironic lift of the lip.

Celia was watching her, quietly. 'Of them?

Hester's friends? They seem very good-tempered. — But I was thinking about Clive and Hester, and how happy they are. I was thinking that it's the greatest success.'

'You mean their marriage? Yes. I suppose it is. Yes. They are very devoted.'

'One sees it in the way they look — or don't look — at each other.' Celia slightly smiled. 'They are always aware of each other — and understanding each other. It's the greatest success; — and you mustn't suppose, you must be sure, Monica.'

'Perhaps I am sure. Perhaps that's the trouble with me,' said Monica, after a moment. 'It's a success which shuts me out; because I can't understand it.'

'Why not?' Celia still smiled.

'I know you always thought me wrong,' said Monica. 'I know you always thought I didn't appreciate Hester's qualities.'

'Wrong? Did I? Anyway — she is different now. Don't you feel that?'

'She's happier. She is completely happy; completely satisfied. She has everything she wants, if that is what you mean.'

'Well, perhaps it does come down to being happy,' said Celia. 'And perhaps nobody who isn't

happy and satisfied, *is* himself. Being unhappy and dissatisfied twists people so, doesn't it? Not that Hester was twisted, exactly; she was always straight. — But I have a feeling now, remembering how she was when I first saw her, that she had her back against a wall. There is no wall now.'

'I don't think that she had her back against a wall in the very least, my darling child; I think she was straight — as a ramrod — because she had spent her life in hitting out against the world — with complete success. I think she saw me with *my* back against the wall; and so I was. If there seems no wall now, it is only because I manage to act as though I could step away if I wanted to. As a matter of fact, I can't move an inch. She is there, close to me — whichever way I stir.' Tears now came to Monica's eyes, the checked tears of her wretched afternoon, and she put her handkerchief, angrily, to her eyes. 'I don't mean that she forces herself on me; I mean that Clive puts her there, between us, and that she dares me to forget her for a moment.'

'She can't help it if he puts her there. It's his loyalty, don't you see? — because he is so afraid that you want to put her out.'

'If he was afraid — of anything connected with

my happiness — could he have brought her down here, set her here, at my door, her and her friends? — I'm bound and gagged and pinioned, Celia, and laid at Hester's feet.' — The scorching simile returned to her. — 'He doesn't know it, poor darling; — no man ever knows these things; — but she does; she knows that I have to swallow anything she presents me with, without a grimace; — like Mr. Gales and his twittering little mistress! — If Clive had the least bit of fear for me, for our relationship, his and mine, he would know that I ran away to hide from him!' And the hot tears rose and she pressed her handkerchief angrily against them.

'But, then — why did they come? What made them come at all? — if it wasn't simply because they thought it would give you pleasure?' said Celia after a moment, finding her way, and Monica's tears were checked as she, too, tried to think why they had come.

'Because Hester wished to display her generosity to Clive; because she wished to please Clive,' she found. — 'I don't know why, unless it's that. — Forgive me, Celia; you see me as the tigress mother; the hateful tigress mother. Perhaps I am.' She dried her eyes and sat gazing out at the green.

'No; it's only that you are so different, you and

Hester.' Celia's downcast eyes seemed studying a difficult move in chess. 'He must see it; Clive must have seen it from the first, and from the first it must have made him miserable. Only he loves her so much that he feels sure you would, too, if you could really get to know her. — Perhaps you will, Monica,' and Celia raised her eyes showing her friend the only possible move out of her predicament. 'Perhaps you will, after all. His love can't be so mistaken. There must be so much to love in Hester — if she makes Clive happy. — Can't you trust that, Monica, and try?'

Monica's eyes dwelt on the girl's delicate face. 'What does it mean to you, their coming here?' she asked. 'I've been wondering about that. — I'm afraid they weren't thinking of me — or of you either, when they came.'

Celia leaned back in her chair and looked across at her. 'I'm not a wounded doe, Monica,' she said, and she smiled.

'Not a wounded doe?'

'No.' Celia returned her gaze with a defiance almost gay; 'though I am sure you feel me that, you and Norah! I was awfully miserable when it all happened, of course; so miserable that I got ill; that couldn't be pretended about and I didn't try to pre-

tend, with you, did I? But I'm not pretending now. It's over.'

'You have, really, cut him out of your life? — What queer creatures we are, Celia. — It almost hurts me to hear you say it.'

'But I don't mean that. I've not cut him out. But it's over — in the way of hurting. It's all become rather like the cathedral floating over the plains, you know, something rather terrible; but beautiful, and very far away,' said Celia.

CHAPTER VI

MONICA saw Captain Ingpen once again before the summer was over. He came down seldom, it seemed, leaving most of the ordering of his new home to Norah's efficient hands, but on going one afternoon to have a practice with Celia she found him at the cottage, seated in the window behind Norah and the tea-table, stretching out one hand to stir the cup of tea that stood on the window-sill beside him and turning the pages of a book with the other. He was an inconsiderate person; she had said that of him, on sufficient evidence, she thought, and his desultory manner as he sat there now, reading his book and drinking his tea, reinforced the opinion. He was not surly or discourteous in his withdrawal; but he was certainly not assiduous, and it vexed Monica a little to see that he treated her dear Celia with as little ceremony as he did his niece. As she greeted them all she felt that her smile, though including, passed him over intentionally, and hoped that he would feel the edge of its aloofness. He remained standing, dark against the window, for a moment after she had taken her place, his head bent forward,

as though the ceiling were too low for him, and she saw that he was looking across at her as he had looked the first time they had met; and recalling her impression then, a slight feeling of discomfort grew in her as she became aware that even after resuming his seat he continued to look at her and not at his book. Perhaps he did not know, sitting against the light as he was, that she observed this, but she suspected suddenly, as his silence and his scrutiny persisted, that he did know, and perhaps expected acquiescence on her part. Again old memories were revived in her, of pursuing suitors. She remembered even, while she chattered on to Celia and Norah, all unaware, the man in India, Charlie's friend and brother-officer, who had dared one day to make mad love to her in his absence. She remembered her rage and his folly of despair, and as she sat there before Captain Ingpen a little flame of angry colour rose up to her cheek, anger with herself that this stranger should have the power of awakening such memories in her. He sat crouched a little forward, a finger between the pages of his book, raising his cup to his lips now and then, and reaching it out once over Norah's shoulder, to ask in the coolest tone for a fresh one, and, as the flame of the old memory sank, Monica was able to

ask herself, whether it was that he admired her and was willing that she should know it, or whether it was that he was sorry for her. The one was almost as absurd and incensing as the other, yet, as she talked and laughed, making Celia and Norah laugh with her, she grew more and more aware of her unhappiness. It was as if something passed between her and the silent stranger; as if she could not keep something from him. He heard, as well as she, that her laughter rang false; he as well as she knew that grief burned in her heart. There was a complicity of consciousness between them, for he, too, was unhappy and he, too, knew that she knew it.

She would have liked to escape, to evade the practice, when tea was over, but Celia had brought out her violin and when Norah said: 'I must be about my work; — will you stay and listen, Uncle Godfrey? — Do you mind his listening?' it was settled, with no word said, that he was to stay and she not to mind playing the Brahms sonata to him. He changed his seat as she and Celia took their places. He moved into Celia's vacated corner of the sofa, where it was true that he could listen more comfortably but where, also, he could continue to look at her as she sat in profile to him at the piano. But, when they began to play, she saw that he was

no longer looking. He clasped his hands behind his head and stretched out his long legs, and sat, absorbed, brooding, his heart enfranchised and appeased, she knew, as was her own heart, by the splendour and magnanimity of the music. She played her part well. And Celia played well. Captain Ingpen did not look up at them when they had finished. He remained sitting in his corner, his hands clasped behind his head, his eyes fixed before him. Only when she was definitely moving towards the door, did he rise to go to open it for her and Celia to pass through, and as she gave him her hand in farewell, she could no longer interpret the cold dark glance that floated, from far away it seemed, to rest as if with a bitter physical pressure upon her. 'He cares for music, that speechless person,' she said to Celia at the door. And Celia said: 'It's difficult to be sure of anything he cares for; but I feel that, too. He always sits and listens when I play.'

And after this meeting six weeks passed; Clive and Hester had been settled in The Crofts for ten days, the summer was over, before she saw Captain Ingpen again. On the October afternoon she had turned her steps in the direction of the woods that lay, across the fields, behind her cottage; not that

the woods were a favourite walk of hers; her favourite walk took her in the opposite direction, up past The Crofts to the hilltop; but she knew that Mr. Gales was at work in the dining-room and did not care to risk encounters. She foresaw, indeed, that she would now seldom walk past The Crofts. Clive would be in town, Robin at his little local Montessori school; if Hester saw her from the house or garden, she would feel constrained to greet her, and one of the conversations that Hester seemed to find easy but that Monica felt laborious, would ensue; so the dull woods would be her frequent portion.

They were singularly dull woods, she thought, as she approached them this afternoon, drawn in duns and russets on a linen-grey sky. It was a windless, heavy day, and when she stepped in among the closely serried ashes and alders — all untended and unthinned so that they grew poorly, the dense underbrush rising about them — she was aware of a slight feeling of stupefaction, as if she entered a dream.

The woods were crossed by sluggish streams — or, rather, ditches — choked with the fallen leaves of a rainy summer, and in passing over each one, on its narrow plank, she felt as if she sank still further into the dream and left each time more of the

past behind her. Everything was still, except when once, from a high branch, a jay screamed loudly. Suddenly, at a little distance, she saw the figure of a man approaching her.

She had come to one of the streams to find the plank which lay across it half eaten away by the damp, and she had paused, about to turn back, when she recognized Captain Ingpen. She remembered then that the woods belonged to the Old Manor Farm and that he must be in possession. He had seen her, that was evident; and since she wore her grey dress and black hat he probably recognized her, too. It would seem uncivil to turn away, and she did not want to stand and wait for him; so, summoning resolution, she crossed the plank with wary footsteps and went forward, noting, as she approached him, Captain Ingpen's heavy shoulders and narrow hips; so heavy above and so spare below was he, that, with the something prowling in his gait now perceptible, he made her think of a gaunt strong forest animal.

Curious, lonely creature, wandering as solitary as herself. He went with the damp tawny woods and with the harsh cry of the jay and she was glad to see him, so she told herself. He offered surmise, significance to her cramped and troubled mind.

'How do you do?' she said, smiling upon him with a smile consciously kept unconscious. 'Do you remember me? We've never spoken, I think, though we have met. — These are your woods, aren't they? I must be trespassing.'

He did not reply for a moment, standing still in the narrow path and resting his curious gaze upon her; hard, empty, yet assessing. And if she were starved for people and events, what was he? So she asked herself, to escape the feeling of discomfort and uncertainty the pause evoked. They had never spoken; and to speak like this, with the light dismissal of all that had, indubitably, passed between them, had in it, she knew, something of a definite rebuff. But a rebuff was necessary in dealing with a man like Captain Ingpen. One must either rebuff him, or seem to accept what he might mean. So she spoke lightly, while thinking of his loneliness and of how inadequate for his needs would be the delicate viands her hunger craved. Distant memories crossed her mind; strange, perilous names; of tribes and mountains: Hindu Kush: the Durânis; the Ghilzáis; adventure, danger glimmered behind them. Meat; freshly killed meat, was what those tiger eyes were asking. Why was he here in these dank English woods? So she kept her discomfort at

bay, scanning him with her well-equipped gaze, and he answered her at last. 'Yes; I remember you. Very well. You played Brahms. Yes; these are my woods, I believe. I have hardly found my way about the place yet.'

He turned, and as, after a moment's hesitation, she went forward, he walked beside her in the narrow path. After all, Monica said to herself, she had intended to go to the end of the woods.

'Do you really think of settling here?' she asked, pursuing her own train of thought, for he said nothing and she knew that he was still looking at her. 'Have you given up India?'

'India has given me up,' said Captain Ingpen. 'I can't go on there. I have been too ill and I am getting too old for the sort of life I like. I can't stand being scorched or frozen any longer.' His voice was as curious as his gaze; so low that one would expect it to be soft; yet so harsh that it startled one.

'And you think that you will be able to stand being rained on? England's a very damp place, a very sodden place, after India.'

'I think it's getting old that's sodden — everywhere,' said Captain Ingpen.

'You can hardly speak of getting old yet in that sense.'

'You are always old when you are past your work,' he said.

She did not intend to enter upon personal expostulations or encouragements, yet since, as Norah's uncle and as country neighbour, Captain Ingpen could not remain a stranger, she was willing to listen to whatever confidences he might feel impelled to impart. And indeed after a moment he went on:

'The only reason I am here is because it is near London and the India Office, and I have some writing to occupy me. One of those atrocious books that one spends the evening of one's days perpetrating and that no one ever reads — except a few jealous contemporaries. Maps and statistics, you know, and photographs of oneself standing among one's native friends. Norah being here was something of a reason too; her mother is the only one of my relatives I could ever endure; I can't be near her as she lives in Shropshire and is married to a poisonous parson; but Norah is a good girl and would see after one if one were ill.'

'How do you like your house?' asked Monica.

He was making no definite appeal for sympathy

yet how clearly she recognized the vanity in him and the something pathetic that went with a manly man's vanity; something boyish and endearing. Still, she would not gratify it. She asked no question about the relations he could not endure, and made no protest about the atrocious book. 'How do you like your house?' was all that she vouchsafed him.

'Well, here it is. — How do *you* like it? Come and look at it,' said Captain Ingpen.

They had reached the end of the wood and there indeed, beyond a hedge, stood the low, ochre-coloured Old Manor Farm, a very plain and not unpleasing dwelling, long lapsed — or risen — from its original utilitarian purposes, with a trellised arch over the doorway and three plots of dilapidated snapdragons on the lawn before it. Monica had only seen it from the road, and, standing still to survey it, found herself placing it with some surprise in its new aspect.

'I had no idea one came upon it like this,' she said. 'It's not so bad, is it? — I should take down that trellis if I were you, and do away with those flower beds.'

'Would you? I know nothing about gardening. I am a perfect savage about all that sort of thing.

Norah intends a border under the wall, I believe. Come and look at it,' he repeated, opening a small wicket-gate in the hedge.

Monica hesitated, a strange apprehension seizing her mind as she stood beside Captain Ingpen in the sombre wood and looked at the ochre-coloured house. Those sluggish streams had been Lethes; to pass through the hedge would be to forget the past; and though Clive was taken from her irretrievably, memory was precious; she had come to the end of everything except memory — was not that always the fate of the old? And if she passed through the wicket with Captain Ingpen, would she not jeopardize her one possession? It would be like entering a new life. And she had nothing to do with new lives.

His eyes were on her, and as she raised her own she thought that she detected in their narrow scrutiny a mocking challenge: 'Are you afraid?' did they not say? 'of me? and of the difference that I may make?' It was childish to harbour such fancies. Her courage, her sense of humour rose to answer him. 'Yes, I must look at it,' she said, and she went through the hedge and walked beside him up the gravel path.

The side of the house that gave on the wood was

patched with damp stains. A jug stood inside a grated larder window. She wondered if his servants took care of him. He was the sort of man who would make his own coffee, with a machine, on the breakfast-table. Yes, he would have good coffee, thought Monica, her competence reassuringly asserting itself as he ushered her into a bare, flagged passage and then into a brightly furnished drawing-room.

'The dining-room is opposite,' he said, 'and there are six bedrooms upstairs. I am going to turn two into a big study and get a view. It's too God-forsaken to sit here with nothing to look out at except that grass-plot. — Here is a comfortable chair. My man will bring us some tea.'

'Tea? Oh, no, thanks, it's far too early; — I must get back for tea.' — He did take things for granted. — 'If you look at the room, and not out of the window, it's rather nice in here, all the same.'

'It's not bad, is it? Norah helped me with it. Big chairs and cheerful colours, and the latest things in art.'

On the walls indeed there hung some very vigorous landscapes, and on the mantelpiece were two or three carved animals that reminded Monica of those that Hester domiciled.

'It's a very unexpected sort of room to find in a house like this,' she said.

'Is it? Is anything unexpected nowadays?'

'Well — I should not have expected Norah or Celia Bowen to have chosen those pictures: — they are very modern girls in some ways, no doubt; but their taste has never developed further than Sickert or Wilson Steer.'

'Oh, they didn't choose those. — I picked those up, just after the war, in London and Paris. — Will you have a cigarette? — They are not what I call modern girls, those two; they seem to me survivals.' He held a match to light her cigarette.

'Of the fittest? I hope you think so.'

'I don't know that I think so,' Captain Ingpen was no longer being vain and boyish; his massive maturity glanced at her dispassionately: 'They will take what is given to them; they won't take what they want. — I like the modern girl for doing that; — or trying to.'

'Perhaps my two are wise enough to know that you can rarely keep what you take. It is what is given that we really keep, I think.'

Captain Ingpen's eye rested on her; his odd, light, hot eye. 'That sounds rather religious, you know,' he observed after a moment, and Monica, who had

not thought of it in this light, who had only thought, instinctively, of defending her two against the other sort of modern girl (Hester, of course, was the other sort) said: 'Perhaps it is. Most things come to religion in the end.'

'Well, I'm not religious,' Captain Ingpen remarked. He certainly was not. He had no need to tell her that, Monica reflected, feeling a stir of pity for him, the ageing, stiffening creature, prowling about the bright cage with its easy chairs and irrelevant modernities. She liked feeling a stir of pity. It was pleasanter to feel pity than fear; though, now that she came to look at him in his cage, she could tell herself that the fear amounted only to a sense of wariness. One kept one's eye on him, that was all; one was wary; as one might be with even a caged lion.

'I've seen too many religions to be religious,' he went on after a moment. 'If I'm anything I'm a Buddhist; — an admirable solvent of all religions. But though I accept the metaphysics of Buddhism I prefer life to Nirvana. The only bother about life is that it doesn't prefer us. — It leaves us in the lurch!' And Captain Ingpen gave a laugh that was like the jay's discordant cry.

Yes: it did indeed. He was at the other end of

the room, smoking, walking up and down, his hands behind his back, and in her chair by the fire Monica forgot him, utterly forgot him for a moment, as she sat and pondered this echo of her thoughts. Was that not exactly what life had done to her — after all the hopes and strivings? It had done worse than merely leave her; it had left her in the lurch. She saw the posture; — bent; arrested; passive and painful. — The lurch, in which one was fixed and tormented. Yet she, too, perhaps, like Captain Ingpen, preferred even the lurch to Nirvana. 'I suppose because one goes on hoping,' she heard herself say.

It was the insidious, dangerous habit, and she had not known till now that it would carry her so far. She rose, disconcerted, as she heard that she had spoken the words aloud. 'I really must be going,' she said. 'You must let me come for tea some day. — I shall have some plants for your border if you care for them. — I like your house, inside; better inside than out. It is rather dreary out, I think. But that can be helped, too.' She had picked up her gloves and stood buttoning her coat at throat and hip, and, making no comment on the suddenness of her decision, Captain Ingpen led her out into the hall, only saying: 'I will walk back with

you, then. I've not begun the book yet. I've all my time. — Wait a moment.' He left her on the threshold.

She stood in the doorway looking at the snapdragons and wondering anew at the things he took for granted. She had not expected to have him beside her on the way back. She had, perhaps, been intending to escape him. Then she heard his footstep sounding along the stone passages and as he appeared before her she saw with surprise that he carried a hatchet in his hand. 'I follow Norah's counsels with regard to chairs and borders,' he remarked, stepping out before her, 'and I will now follow yours about the trellis. Stand a little inside; — it might fall on you. — It's a farmer's house with the trellis, isn't it? Now we will transform it into a gentlemanly residence,' and, the surprise warming to amazement, Monica saw him lay the hatchet with fell strokes about the base of the harmless structure.

'Oh! — Wait! — Do wait and think it over first!' She did not know what to say. The flimsy supports came crashing down; the poor old tattered crimson-rambler drooped on its fastenings. 'Really this is reckless!' she cried, half amused, half indignant.

'Not the least reckless,' said Captain Ingpen,

wielding his weapon with a sort of indolent enjoyment. 'I accept your judgment. Nothing could be less reckless. — Now there is a mess! Can you step through it?'

'You *are* reckless. You enjoy destruction,' Monica said, still with her startled laugh.

'Well, that's true enough; when it's of rubbish.' He held out his hand. She steadied herself on it and sprang; but her ankle struck against a spar of splintered wood and she found herself precipitated into Captain Ingpen's arms. For a moment of confusion and anger, anger against him — and against herself for suspecting him — she did suspect that they closed about her. 'My fault,' she heard him say, calmly: — or was it calmly? 'You are not hurt?' — He placed her on the path.

'My ankle is a little hurt, I think.' She hoped that she, too, spoke calmly, or seemed to: and her tumble would explain her hurried breath, her heightened colour. He was observing her colour, and then he looked down at her ankle. 'Yes; your stocking is torn. Are you angry with me?' he asked, and his ambiguous smile rested on her; 'I only meant to satisfy your taste about the trellis; I didn't mean you to hurt your ankle.'

'Of course I'm not angry. It's not really hurt.'

Monica moved along the path. But she was angry, and the more for his having asked it; and she suspected him now of knowing what she felt and of enjoying her predicament and of inwardly jibing at the embraced Victorian lady.

'Now, do look at the house before you go,' he said. He had moved beside her. 'And tell me that you think it improved.' He was completely master of the situation.

She looked up at the bare façade. 'Yes; it is much better. You might have a rose there, trained over the door. Not a crimson-rambler. I am glad that's gone. Some nice old-fashioned yellowish rose to go with the colour of the house. Yes; it's really very nice like that. Recklessness has its uses.'

The breeze had risen and the wood rustled at hand, darker now and more melancholy. 'I will go back by the road,' said Monica. 'There are too many insecure planks to cross in the wood.'

'I was just thinking when I met you,' said Captain Ingpen, 'how easy it would be — if one managed to break one's neck in a tumble — to disappear in the mud of one of those ditches and never be heard of again.'

'They *are* rather grisly streams,' Monica admitted.

They walked in silence then between the hedgerows. A sense of excitement remained from her anger with Monica. Her thoughts were no longer occupied with Captain Ingpen and his daring; they had turned to Clive; not dreamlike now, not far away or forgotten. On the contrary, he stood out sharply in her mind; sharp, small and near, and, for the first time in her life, it felt to her as if she looked at her son coldly. Was he not weak? even a little fatuous? Was it not fatuous to thrust his wife on her as he had now done, imagining that the enforced intimacy would compel affection? The pain of the summer day when he had shattered all her joy returned to her, deepened by this strange sense of alienation. He had said that it was Hester's idea, not his; he had said that Hester made him see her loneliness; he had understood her joy so little as to tell her that, and look for response and gratitude.

Captain Ingpen's voice broke in strangely on her thoughts. 'But what do you suppose one goes on hoping *for*?'

So far had she drifted on the dark current of her mood that she looked up at him almost with astonishment.

'You said one went on hoping. You were thinking about preferring life to Nirvana. — What does

one go on hoping for? — At our age? Do you know?'

Was this dark tumult life? And the sluggish dream of the wood Nirvana? She felt herself struggle, with herself, and, it seemed, against Captain Ingpen. But she would not attempt to evade him. That might involve her in some undignified mishap. She armed herself with what she could secure of cool sincerity. 'One hopes to feel again the things one has felt; the things that have given life its value.' She heard the words and they were lifeless; yet she had believed in them.

'Ah. Yes; just so. But at our age — for you are as old as I am, I suppose — it's rather idiotic, isn't it?'

'Perhaps not. Perhaps not idiotic. There are always the grandchildren,' her bitterness found. How much good, indeed, was Robin going to do her; — since Hester would never believe that she could do him any?'

'Grandchildren? Have you grandchildren?'

'Yes. I have a grandson; four years old.'

'Really. That surprises me. You are not grandmotherly. But one forgets how obsolete the grandmother type has become. Grandchildren?' he repeated. 'Are they really worth hoping about?'

'I think so.'

'No you don't. I can't believe it.' He did not look at her. He walked beside her, his cigarette hanging at the edge of his lower lip, giving it a disdainful projection. 'Why not face it? Why not own that life is an illusion? We get nothing that we hope to get. Or if we get it, we never keep it.'

'Never?' She, too, looked before her. Was this what he had seen in her face that afternoon at Norah's?

'Never. You know it as well as I do, since you are a brave woman. You often say it to yourself. No love lasts. That is what we want, of course. Not only to get it, but to keep it. It doesn't last.'

'No love?'

'Not one. Haven't you watched it in your own life? In other people's? There may be a perfect time, a perfect relation; but hardly is it grasped and realized before it begins to change. It is swept away; or broken. Everything fades, Mrs. Wilmott. Everything.'

It was horrible to hear him riveting her chains upon her. His words seemed to knock great iron nails into her heart and, as she heard them, Charlie's face flickered, remote, unsubstantial, to the tune of an old waltz of the nineties. And there went Clive, looking down at Hester, who held him

by the hem of his coat. Something cried out in her then and rose up and wrenched itself free of the manacles. Of course she loved Clive. Even if he forgot her. Even if she could do nothing for him. It was only in a nightmare that she could hold him off and watch him.

'One goes on loving,' she said. 'It is the love we give we keep.' She was speaking more to herself than to Captain Ingpen. But he too needed help, and she was sorry for him.

'So one flatters oneself. One goes on as long as one has hopes of receiving something back. I don't count myself more stable than the rest of the phantasmagoria. Perhaps what we go on hoping for is God; — the thread the beads are strung on. I suspect that the thread is even more of an illusion than the beads.'

'All the same, we do prefer life to Nirvana. Our preference may have a meaning.'

'Don't look for the thread,' he jibed. 'It's not there.'

'It's as much there as the beads. There is something we care for, call it beads or thread. — Are you trying to frighten me?' she asked, and her glance, with its kindness, had recovered its integrity.

'I am trying to make you own you are a companion in misfortune. One likes to have a companion. One likes to feel one isn't alone, you know.'

'Yes, I know,' said Monica. And the strange fact was that she and Captain Ingpen were together and not alone. Let it rest at that for the moment. 'And now, what do you think of *my* house?' she said. Oddley Green was reached and they were approaching her cottage. 'It's very cheerful, isn't it?

'Damnably cheerful,' said Ingpen, with a laugh almost boyish. 'I think I like mine better. It keeps up no pretences at all events.'

'But I live up to my pretences,' said Monica, also laughing. 'I *am* cheerful, you know.'

'Yes. I know about your cheerfulness.' His eye rested on her with the glint of its challenge. 'You're not going to ask me into it, I suppose, lonely as I am? You've had enough of me.'

'For the moment I have: but I am going to ask you if you care to dine on Saturday night — and play bridge afterwards. My son and his wife are coming.'

'The father and mother of the grandchild?'

'Yes; my only son.'

'Very dear, then, I suppose? And are you fond

of your daughter-in-law? Mothers never are, are they?' He was not impudent, but she did not know why not. She must accept him, if she accepted him at all, on his own terms. She felt that she accepted him yet kept him at the distance she intended as she said: 'Very fond. She is a charming young woman: very clever and interesting.'

'Does she take what she wants, or what she is given?' Captain Ingpen enquired, and Monica said: 'Oh — she's quite modern; you will approve of her.'

CHAPTER VII

MONICA went up to London on Saturday, making the cheerless railway journey that plunged one so soon from the menaced countryside into the sordid suburbs. One might pass all one's life snugly ensconced in the heart of London and remain almost unaware of this encompassing wilderness. She returned to the heart, now, as an outsider, and there was almost a sense of adventure in taking a taxi at the underground station, after the added journey from Liverpool Street. She looked at London and was aware of London, now, as an outsider is aware; just as she looked at and was aware of Clive. A large luncheon-party in Hyde Park Gardens restored to her some of the old sense of adequacy. She saw herself there as a still significant woman to whom black was always becoming, and a friend said over coffee: 'My dear, you are a marvel. — You look ten years younger than any of us.'

'Living in the country puts one into cold storage,' Monica answered. And keeping one's face set to a ready brightness was preserving, doubtlessly.

After lunch she bought some salted almonds — of which both Clive and Hester were fond — and

fruit for her dinner, had tea with Margaret Orde, whose father was now dead and who had come to live in Bloomsbury, and on the Liverpool Street Station platform met Norah, also returning from a day in town.

'It's such a dismal extension of one's life — this station — isn't it, Norah?' she said, greeting her young friend.

'I always rather like it. I always think it's rather exciting,' said Norah. 'It makes the country all the nicer.'

'But it becomes part of the country in one's thoughts.'

'But that's a very wrong way of looking at it,' said Norah laughing; and she was right of course.

When they were established in their third-class carriage, their parcels disposed in the rack above them, Monica said: 'Your uncle is coming to dine to-night with Clive and Hester. I didn't know that he was settled in until the other day. I met him and saw his house. You have done it all charmingly, Norah, but it looks rather desolate all the same.'

'It *is* a desolate place,' said Norah, 'and I can't quite see him there; but it seems to suit him all right, and he's got an awfully nice oldish couple to

take care of him. — His servants are fond of him. He is that sort of person. I begin to see what mother used to mean when she said he was endearing, in spite of everything.'

'In spite of what?' Monica asked.

'Well, I'm afraid Uncle Godfrey has been rather a bad lot. It's just as well you should know it if you are going to be kind to him,' said Norah. 'And anyway you are almost sure to hear about it — since he had to leave the army because of it.'

'Because of it! Oh, poor man! — In what sense a bad lot?' She could not associate Captain Ingpen with anything disgraceful; only with things dangerous and difficult. Norah's words inflicted an odd blow on her heart.

'Oh — just in the usual sense; about women. He started his career by a love-affair with his Colonel's wife in India, years ago; and it all came out and there was an awful row and he was permitted to retire; — that's the proper expression I think. Of course I was too young to hear anything about it; it's only from what mother has said; because Mrs. Ingpen was a friend of hers. They got married after her husband divorced her. I remember great family wrangles because father wouldn't let mother ask her to stay. You know what a darling mother would be

about things like that. She used to brave father and go to stay with Mrs. Ingpen, in Sussex, and once when I was in London at a concert with mother I saw her. Very pretty; too pretty; very much made up and very peevish; but, as mother said, one couldn't wonder at that; Uncle Godfrey led her such a life.'

'Oh, dear! — He was not faithful to her — after all that she had braved for him?'

'Anything but faithful. I will say, from my glimpse of her, that she struck me as the sort of woman a man might make love to but not at all the sort he would care to marry. The wistful siren type, you know; I can't stand them. I don't think mother was really very fond of her: — only very sorry. Anyway he made her miserable and she wouldn't divorce him.'

'Swept away: broken: everything fades,' thought Monica. 'Did she go on caring for him, then?' she asked.

'I suppose she did. Mother said she always believed he would come back if she held on. But he never did come back and she died a year or two ago, still holding.'

'Poor woman,' said Monica.

'Yes, poor woman; but it's rather mean all the

same, don't you think?' said Norah, ' to hold a man if he wants to be free?'

'Does a man like that want any further freedom than he takes?'

'Well — if there was someone whom he couldn't get unless he married them, he would want it, wouldn't he? And it's rather revengeful to keep a man against his will I think.'

'But it must be rather difficult not to be revengeful under her particular circumstances,' said Monica. She seemed to feel the rusty cut in the heart of Captain Ingpen's peevish wife.

It was late when she reached home and she had only time to arrange her fruit and flowers before dressing for dinner. The parlour-maid announced Captain Ingpen as she tied the last knot of her tea gown and she stood for a moment feeling a sudden reluctance that recalled to her, not so much Captain Ingpen and his ambiguities, as her own girlhood when, all dressed before a dance, she had used to stand at the head of the staircase in her father's house and feel afraid, but rather deliciously afraid, of all that might befall below. The old waltz tune of the nineties surged into her mind again and she remembered that Charlie had befallen her at a dance. She had worn a tight pink satin bodice and a full

tulle skirt and her great-grandmother's pearls — pearls sold long ago during the hard years. How Charlie would have grieved could he have known of all her struggles. She was glad he had never known, and as she went down the stairs she kept her heart fixed in pity and tenderness on Clive, so full of hope and anxious happiness; on Charlie, lying far away in his Indian grave.

Captain Ingpen was in the lower room, bending his massive head to one of Charlie's water-colours, and as he turned and looked up at her standing on the steps above him, she saw that he found her beautiful. She preferred not to think of Captain Ingpen's capacity for appreciation. If it had been fear she had felt just now, it had not been the delicious fear of girlhood and there was almost a sense of anger in her as she asked: 'Do you know my India?'

'Yes, slightly. I know most of India I imagine.' He was looking at her with a faintly provocative touch of amusement, rather as he had looked when she hurt her ankle. — 'Beautiful; that is what you are; and I don't care how many grandchildren you have,' was what his eyes were saying, though he asked, with a sort of indulgent acquiescence, as though he accepted her terms: 'Did you care about

India? — what you saw of it? Were you there for long?'

'Only two years. No, I didn't care for it at all; — but my India was only an extension of South Kensington, with all the defects of that type of society and none of its virtues. I didn't like Indian architecture — those nasty teeming temples; — and I didn't like the Indian landscape, or the climate; it oppressed me. — And all those mysterious dark servants; the impossibility of personal relations with the herds of people who took care of one. — No; I hated it.' She felt that she chattered a little.

'Are these your work?'

'No; they are my husband's.'

'I didn't think them yours somehow.'

It was wonderful indeed to see how much of South Kensington and its standards dear Charlie had put into his water-colours. They were very guileless, very conscientious and disastrously picturesque. It had made him very happy — thank goodness — to paint them and give them to her. Yet glancing at them for a moment she saw, as she had never paused to do before, that the pictures that Hester's friends painted had indeed performed a useful function. They, like Captain Ingpen, had swept away rubbish.

'I hear my young people,' she said.

He did not follow her to the upper room. He paused to glance at the books on a shelf and the goldfish in their bowl.

'Well, darling.' Clive had come in first and taking each other's hands they kissed each other.

'Well, Mummy,' he returned, and he held her off and surveyed her. 'How lovely!'

'You remember this dress?'

'Rather! It's my favourite. — Hester has a lovely dress to-night, too; put on for the first time, specially for you. — Lovely!' he repeated looking her up and down. And gently lifting her hands, so that the long, black, transparent sleeves slid back, he said: 'The arms of Helen as well as the tresses, Mummy.'

'Don't be absurd, Clive!' Captain Ingpen was behind them. She had heard his step and Clive, startled, evidently saw him over her shoulder.

'This is my son, Captain Ingpen. Clive, this is Norah Unwin's uncle. — Where is Hester?'

'She's just coming.'

Captain Ingpen, though not taller than Clive, seemed to tower above him in bulk and darkness and maturity. He bent his head to him rather as he had bent it to Charlie's water-colours. 'I'm afraid

it's a hopelessly dismal place; woods and house,' he said, as Clive made some comment on the Manor Farm. — 'You found the woods specially dismal, didn't you, Mrs. Wilmott?'

'But you could do a great deal with them,' said Monica.

'What, for instance?' asked Ingpen.

'Well, you could have those ditches dug out and drained. And you could plant blue anemones — and primroses — in the clearings. I think primroses would grow there. I only wish I had a wood to play with.'

'That little wood behind us is full of primroses in the spring, you know,' said Clive. 'And that *is* yours now, Mummy.'

Hester appeared in the doorway as he spoke and Monica saw at once from her aspect, as she paused there, her eyes turning to her husband, that the evening, to her, had some special significance. If Clive was hoping that Hester would please his mother, Hester was hoping — was not that it? — to please him. Or rather was it not that, sure of pleasing him, she displayed for him her equipped readiness to do all that was requested of her. The new dress, Monica recognized it at once, had been requested, and as a tribute to her own taste for pretty

clothes. Hester had never, in Monica's sense, dressed at all; and this dress was fashionable; almost, to her fastidious eye, absurdly so; yet it strangely became the young woman; Monica had never seen her look so nearly beautiful. Her throat was set in a thick circle of red coral beads; her figure wrapped in fringed red and silver; and so naked was she in her modishness that she made Monica think, with her high dark head and gleaming liquid surfaces, of an Indian princess, standing beside some pool from whose waters she had just arisen. Her eyes were turned on Clive and Clive was smiling at her with the tender reticent radiance of some secret code.

'Yes; they are happy: yes — they understand each other,' thought Monica, and for a moment her heart was glad, seeing that unity.

And now Hester's eyes rested on the stranger who stood behind her husband.

'Captain Ingpen, Hester; our neighbour; Norah's uncle you know.' Monica took her hands in hers murmuring as she kissed her: 'It's lovely, the dress; quite lovely, my dear.'

Hester was still standing on the threshold and Captain Ingpen had advanced into the light. 'We have met before, I think,' he said smiling. 'Isn't it — wasn't it — Hester Blakeston?'

'How do you do,' said Hester. She was not smiling.

'I heard you were married, but I never heard to whom. This is delightful,' said Captain Ingpen, and, though he did not look delighted, he continued to smile at the young woman.

'How amusing that you should know each other,' said Monica, while Hester moved slowly forward and came to stand beside her husband. 'And that you should be neighbours without yet having found each other out. — When was it that you met?'

'In London; after the war. — Whom did not one meet in those days? — eh, Mrs. Wilmott?' smiled Ingpen. 'You have every right to forget me if you choose.'

'Oh — I don't forget you at all,' said Hester. 'Where is my shawl, Clive?'

'Have you left it upstairs — or in the hall?' — Clive was going to look but Hester checked him; 'It's in the car. I remember. How tiresome of me. Will you get it?' She walked away to the fireplace at the other end of the room.

'Wasn't she interested in Russia? Didn't she perform great feats for such a young creature — just fresh from Girton if I remember — and write some very remarkable articles about Dostoievsky

and the Bolsheviks?' Captain Ingpen at their distance enquired, politely and with lowered voice, casting a glance upon the silvery form of the Indian princess, her slender limbs outlined against the flames. Strange, thought Monica, that Hester should first have been presented to her awareness as boyish and in rubber boots. She could imagine nothing more feminine or more alluring than the translucent figure drooping before the fire. Captain Ingpen did not look allured, however; he looked rather ironic, as though the memory of the young creature and the Bolsheviks made him smile inwardly.

'That was in the past before I knew Hester. She still performs feats, or is quite ready to do so: she is wonderfully equipped; wonderfully secure.'

'Almost frighteningly so, eh? She always frightened me, I remember, so very young and so very fierce she was, and believed that every problem was just about to be solved — by the Girton young — here and now, in England's green and pleasant land.'

'I never thought of Hester as harbouring illusions.' Monica smiled a little dryly, for she could admit no confidences with regard to Hester. 'And they have solved a good many problems, the be-

lieving young — haven't they? — Are you cold, Hester?' she went forward and joined her daughter-in-law at the fireplace.

'I haven't enough clothes on,' said Hester, still leaning her hands on the mantelshelf above her head and still looking down at the flames. 'That is the bother of these smart dresses; — one can wear only one layer under them and that a thin one. I do feel a little chilly. Thanks, Clive. — Yes; I will put it on.'

Clive had returned with the folds of a coral shawl dripping from his arm and as he put it round her he said: 'You haven't caught cold, have you?'

'Not in the least. It's only this silly dress of yours,' said Hester, holding the shawl against her breast as she moved to a table, took a cigarette and leant to light it at the lamp chimney, her small, illumined face cold and concentrated.

'You have only time for three whiffs,' said Monica. 'Dinner will be ready in half a minute.' And Clive said, smiling at his wife: 'Hester is horribly wasteful of her cigarettes; it's her only extravagance.'

Monica had always loved to look at her son across the dinner-table, their own little table for four in the Chelsea flat, when he had been the most

dependable of hosts, and she had not so seen him for years. The contrast between his face and Captain Ingpen's struck her anew as they sat round the candles and crystal and white napery, and it was not so much now between youth and maturity as between two different kinds of life. Clive's face was like a high taper burning upward; Captain Ingpen's like a half-consumed log, charred, jagged, a sullen red smouldering along its edge. How could she, even for a nightmare moment, have thought of Clive as weak, she wondered, looking across at him and noting the pure, meditative hollow cast by the reflected candlelight above the bow of his upper lip.

He and Ingpen were talking about the new book on India. 'Things quite as grim and equally true could be written about us, couldn't they?' Ingpen was saying, eating his soup and glancing sideways at Clive, a hard, appraising glance. 'I know all those festering Hindus too well, though my time has been mainly spent among the people who were destined by nature to be their destroyers — the people we prevent from preying on them.'

He was very affable, very suave, and Clive was very courteous, but already, as she listened to them, Monica felt that they were not going to like each other. Neither was Hester going to like Captain

Ingpen. Wrapped in a stubborn silence, she had refused soup and was crunching salted almonds, her elbows on the table.

'It's very perverse to say that things as grim and as true could be written about us; I don't accept that for a moment,' she said, since Clive did not seem inclined to take up the challenge.

'Don't you?' Ingpen turned his eyes on her and she felt a new edge in their raillery. 'And what do you know about it? What does any woman know about our civilization? All you see is the tidied-up world we men present to you.'

'Good Heavens! Where have you been living during the last twenty years! Do you really imagine that we don't do as much tidying up as you do! — You've been a Rip van Winkle among the warrior tribes!' laughed Monica. 'And indeed, even before we gained all our modern freedoms, our function has always been to tidy up after you! — Hasn't it, Hester?' and she appealed for support to the avowed feminist. But, closely enveloped in her rosy shawl, Hester crunched her almonds and made no reply.

'But exactly; — exactly,' Ingpen was softly and rather disagreeably laughing. 'You tidy up after us. It's what you've always done, what you always will do — and very creditable it is to you. After we've

finished with all the dirty, discreditable, necessary work that underlies every civilization, you'll bring your mops and pails and tidy up! You do, I grant you, keep us much cleaner on the surface, here in Europe; but just as much foulness and iniquity seethes underneath as in India; and there's no hope of a warrior tribe to wipe us out.'

'Are the warrior tribes so just and upright?' Monica was a little disconcerted. There was a snarl perceptible beneath the supple surfaces of her tiger's good manners and she wondered if he might become, in his hostility towards life, a little unmanageable.

'They are clean in comparison with us; there's that to be said for them,' said Ingpen, while Clive, helping himself to fish, glanced at him coldly. 'They have evolved no sewers and no sewer-rats. The moment you get civilization — or, in other words, sewers — you get sewer-rats. What happens to our civilization, I suppose, is not the warrior-tribes, but the sewer-rat; — as we see in Russia.'

'Our rats will find us a more difficult mouthful,' Clive commented, frostily smiling, and at that Hester spoke, raising her head and fixing her eyes upon her husband: 'And who do you mean by rat?' she enquired. 'Oppressed people? Exploited

people? The English working classes? I can assure you that there is quite as much civilization to be found among them as among their so-called betters, and very much more hope for the future. I think it is they who are going to do most of the tidying up; — and I agree that there's a great deal to be done. — But they won't devour anybody, as the wretched Russians had to do; it is uneducated to draw any comparison between the Russian despotism and our democracy; — they will be perfectly decent and kind through all the reorganization, you may be sure of it; as they always have been.'

Clive remained, looking quietly at his wife while she delivered herself of this homily, which was not, it was evident, directed against him. When she had finished he said, smiling with just a touch of quizzical reassurance; as though he calmed and sustained her: 'Quite right, dear.'

'Yes; quite right, Mrs. Wilmott!' Ingpen echoed, bowing across the table towards her. Had she touched him in her youth and ardour? He, too, smiled, and his smile was not sardonic. 'We all agree that the British working man is the best of good fellows — if also one of the stupidest. No doubt he will evolve a very tidy world for us; all garden-cities, greyhound-racing, cinemas and cheap

beer. Fortunately I shall be in my grave before it arrives.'

'Don't be too sure of that!' said Hester, flashing a fiery glance upon him.

When Monica was alone with her daughter-in-law in the drawing-room, she prepared herself for trenchant comment on the reactionary guest, but, saying not a word of Captain Ingpen, Hester extended herself on the sofa, remarking, as she stretched out a nonchalant hand for a cigarette:

'Monica, I'd rather you told Robin no more fairy-tales when he is with you. He came home the other day very much over-excited, with his head full of captive princesses and dragons. He's a nervous child; I'm anxious about him already; and it doesn't make my task the easier.'

Monica had been but too well aware during the meal from which they had just come that her dinner was far from a success, but not till she heard this request did she know how much ill-temper had seethed beneath Hester's composure. So unexpected, so unprovoked were her words, that she felt herself struck suddenly upon the cheek and tears almost rose to her eyes with the sense of tingling aggression.

'My dear Hester, what nonsense!' she exclaimed.

'I was quite aware that you would think it so,'

said Hester, drawing at her cigarette and watching a ring of smoke float above her head. 'But I must insist upon my own point of view nevertheless.'

'A child who has heard no fairy-tales is illiterate,' said Monica, standing across the room near a table and resting her finger-tips on it as she surveyed the languid form of her daughter-in-law. She kept herself from trembling. 'Fairy-tales are as much a part of a child's heritage as Shakespeare and the Gospel of Saint John!'

'Our modern ideas of a child's heritage are very different from those of your generation,' Hester returned. 'We understand children's minds in a way you had no opportunity of doing. You were as ignorant of psychology as your grandparents were of evolution.'

'A great deal of your modern psychology will prove as obsolete in a generation as a great deal of Darwinian evolution has already proved, my dear Hester.'

'I don't imagine that anything essential in either will become obsolete,' said Hester. 'Jibes at psychoanalysis will be forgotten as completely as jibes at our monkey ancestry. — Of course people try to make fun of what belittles and frightens them.' And, waiving the general question, she went on.

'Shakespeare comes at his own time to a maturing child; I shall begin to read the historical plays to Robin as soon as he starts English history; and the Gospel of Saint John, no doubt, when he is old enough to take an interest in religious myths. But for a nervous, imaginative boy like him, fairy-tales are definitely harmful. I've no theory against them; that would be silly and pedantic; but from my study of Robin's reactions I've come to suspect that they put a child's mind into the attitude of panic and credulity that is at the root of all human superstitions. It's only a step, after all, from Beauty and the Beast to the Three Wise Men and the Star. — We have a great deal of useless and harmful lumber to rid ourselves of, my dear Monica.'

Never had Hester so displayed her arrogant assurance. Never, Monica realized it in the midst of her anger, had she heard her make so long a speech. Anger was flaming up, though she tried to stifle it, and it was shot through by all sorts of fiery memories: — The black eyebrows and the dusty black cloak lined with red; the Registrar's office; the jibing friend sitting with Mr. Gales on the stair — flashed and crackled on the upward flame.

'We differ in our definition of lumber. It's a step

from Beauty and the Beast, if you will, to the Three Wise Men and the Star, but a step a child's mind distinguishes quite as quickly as ours; — superstition doesn't come into the question at all. — What a bleak, ungarnished world you seem to inhabit, Hester.'

'I'm not justifying my world to you,' said Hester. 'I'm only asking you not to take my child into the world of fairy-tales.' She rose as she spoke. Clive and Ingpen were entering and Clive was saying, with a somewhat tightened utterance: 'What about fairy-tales, Hester?' He was glad to be done with Captain Ingpen.

Hester made no reply. She walked away to the fireplace and, again leaning her hands on the mantelshelf, smoked on, her back turned to them.

'It's only that Hester has been forbidding me to tell them to Robin,' said Monica. She could not help it. It was the untamed girlhood in her and the impulse of vengeance flamed up as her anger had done. She smiled as she spoke, moving forward to the card-table and seeing reflected from Clive's face how white and flashing was her own aspect. 'They aren't allowed to modern children, it seems. — Are you sorry you used to hear about Saint George and the Dragon and Puss in Boots, Clive? Do you

think they did you harm?' She glanced again at her son as she placed the packs of cards.

His face had taken on the stiffened, watchful look that it broke her heart to see. And Hester said no word. Hester the aggressor was wise and crafty; she said no word in accusation or self-exculpation. She stood there smoking in her coral-red shawl.

'I adored fairy-tales,' said Clive, looking from her to Hester and back again. He spoke carefully and his mother felt his care as a sword in her heart. Oh, no, he would never take her part against Hester, however Hester misused her! 'Only; — Hester thinks Robin rather unusually nervous, you see.'

'Yes; I do see. I think there may be other reasons for his nervousness. He is never nervous when he is with me. — But I'm not dreaming of rebellion. — It would be useless to do that, I know. — Shall we cut for partners? — Will you come, Hester? — It's a dreadful privation for a grandmother, Captain Ingpen. Fairy-tales are the only function left to a grandmother really.'

'Everything is changed since our young days, isn't it?' said Ingpen. He had joined her at the table and as she met his eyes she had a strange sense that

he and she were united against Clive and Hester. He understood and sustained her as Clive understood and sustained Hester. His massive strength upheld and quieted her. 'You gave your child sweetmeats and the modern mother gives hers antiseptics,' he smiled. 'You were very naughty and self-indulgent, no doubt; but we have still to see which method produces the best results.'

Hester had now come forward. 'If you don't mind, I'll play with Clive,' she said. 'I'm not good at bridge and he understands my game.' She spoke with perfect self-possession. In contrast to Hester's composure Monica was aware that her own outburst appeared as undignified. She had behaved like a fool. She had put Hester in the wrong before a stranger. Clive could not feel any sympathy for her, seeing her do that. She had been a fool and her heart burned with the consciousness of folly as they sat down and shuffled and dealt.

It was true that Hester was not good at bridge. At all events she was not good to-night. She was perhaps not as composed as she pretended to be. 'Our trick, I think,' said Ingpen when, at the end of the first round, she put out her hand; and, drawing it back quickly, she muttered: 'Sorry.' But she held her head high and kept her eyes on her cards and if

at last she and Clive were beaten, it was not a shameful defeat. Clive indeed was playing very well. 'He is sustaining her,' thought Monica.

'We are well matched,' Ingpen commented at the end of the next round. 'He understands her game and I already understand yours.' He glanced at her, slightly smiling, and Monica saw that Clive observed the glance.

Now they were bidding for the next lead. Clive had dealt and went one spade. Imperturbably Ingpen said: 'Three hearts.'

'Three spades,' said Hester instantly, and Clive smiled across at her, thanking her for her promptitude and courage. But Monica, astonished out of her anger, looked round at the girl. She herself held an excellent hand of spades. Clive had the lead and Hester laid down her hand, black with disastrous clubs. There was a moment's silence; then Monica said: 'It was a mistake, Hester. Take it back.' She was even sorry for Hester, seeing the look of wild fury that swept across her face as she stared down at the cards. 'What did I say?' she asked.

'You said three spades. Take it back, my dear.'

'If course I won't take it back.' She rose to her feet, leaving the hand lying and pushing back her chair. 'I'm sorry, Clive. I've been an ass and you

must pay the penalty.' Walking away to the steps, she descended to the lower room.

'Shall we really go on, Clive?' said Monica. 'It was a mere slip of the tongue.'

He had been looking after his wife and as his eyes came back to his mother she saw that they were hardly aware of her. 'Of course we'll go on.' So they went on and Monica and Ingpen swept up twelve tricks.

When the slaughter was accomplished, Clive jumped up and went to the steps. 'It's all over! Come back!' He stood smiling down at his wife, again almost quizzically. So united were they that he could venture to tease Hester out of her bad temper.

And indeed, from where she sat, Monica saw that, as she appeared from below, she lifted her face to her husband, as if with a murmur of compunction.

'Better luck this time,' said Ingpen. He was shuffling now, with lean, skilful hands. He wore an odd ring, a little too large for him; it slipped forward when he dealt and Monica fastened her eyes upon it so that she need not look at Hester and Clive; a flat gold ring circled by two broad bands of black enamel.

'You mean, I think, better play,' said Hester.

'No, no,' smiled Ingpen. 'You were wool-gathering. That's bad luck.'

'I beg your pardon. I was not wool-gathering,' Hester retorted, her head high, her eyes on her traducer, while a deep colour rose to her cheek. 'It was a slip of the tongue.'

'Come, I can't believe that,' said Ingpen, tossing the cards to their places; 'because you would hardly have meant to say three clubs, eh? That wouldn't have done you any good, would it?' He spoke benignly, almost paternally, as if to a forward child who must not be left in possession of an illusory triumph. Hester bit her lip, drew hard at her breath, and fixed her eyes upon her cards while Clive cast a glance of cold repudiation upon his mother's guest.

They played in almost unbroken silence after that. Monica and Ingpen exchanged a word once or twice but neither Hester nor Clive spoke, and she understood too well their withdrawal.

'And now I think we must go, Mummy,' Clive said when the rubber was played and he and Hester beaten. 'Hester has a rather full day before her tomorrow and oughtn't to be late.'

'Oh — don't go on my account, I beg,' said

Hester, tossing the end of her shawl over her shoulder. 'I'm not in the least tired.'

'I am, then,' said Clive, and Monica wondered, hearing the note of dryness in his voice, if even his patience had worn thin.

She did not press them to stay. Beset by bitter fears and bitterer self-reproaches, she only prayed that they would go before Ingpen so that she might not be left alone with them. Clive in that case might attempt some strained reconciliation and she knew that she could bear no more.

They all went to the table where whiskey and soda and barley-water were set out and now, as they drank, it was Clive who contrived a few utterances. 'How's Robin's fountain getting on, Mummy?' he asked, and he politely enquired of Ingpen if there was a good garage at the Old Manor Farm. Dear Clive; he would always try, at least, to help her out. Then they were gone, both kissing her good-night, and for a moment, as she stood by the table looking after them, her mind was filled with the imagination of what they would be saying as they sped away from the evening she had offered them: 'Rather grisly, wasn't it?' That might well be Hester's sober comment. And Clive might reply: 'And what an odious man Mummy has picked up. I hope he

didn't utterly enrage you.' She gazed for a moment at these visions with a bitter heart and then, looking round, saw that Captain Ingpen was gazing at her. But, whatever his ambiguities the other day, there was to-night no failure in his understanding. He did not conceal from her that he saw and pondered on her plight; but he made no comment on it, only saying, kindly and gravely, as he looked about him — rather as Robin had done: 'I like this room. I like it much better than mine.'

'Well; — it's a growth; it's all my life.'

'Yes. I know. That's just it. — I like your life,' he said, moving to the door, and bending his head to a picture here, a book there, as he went: — it reminded her again of something feline; but endearingly feline; the kindly interest a cat may take in a new environment. 'How peaceful you've been,' he said.

'Well; I don't know about that.' Monica went beside him. 'I haven't had an easy life in some ways. I worked very hard for a great many years, and had anxieties.'

'Yes. I know. Norah told me. All the same you've been peaceful.' They were in the hall now, and again he paused, to look at a row of engravings that hung there: — French cathedrals; Amiens,

Rheims, Beauvais, Chartres, Bourges and Vézelay; — all the cathedrals she and Clive had visited together.

'Isn't that lovely of the interior of Amiens,' she said. 'It's like a white foxglove, I always think; all rising lightness and grace. — You've seen them?'

'Only Chartres.'

'There's nothing to compare to Chartres, of course. — You remember this view from below? — And this of the West front?'

'Pretty well. Unfortunately I didn't see the windows. It was during the war and they were covered up.'

'I should rather like to see it quite dark like that. It would be another sort of sublimity. — You ought to go to all the French cathedrals one day.'

'I must,' said Ingpen; 'I must take Norah and your fragile young friend and see them all.' He looked round at her from the pictures. 'Will you come, too? Why not all four of us go and live in France and see cathedrals?'

Was it a covert recognition of her plight? She smiled it away. 'One might find a worse way of spending the evening of one's days.'

'I mean it, you know.' He scrutinized her. 'You were right about this climate. It's sodden. Why,

— after one's done one's work, married off one's children, kept the warrior-tribes from devouring the Indians — why not loaf and enjoy oneself in a country where there are good beds and good cooking? — and these for an object? The four of us would find plenty of occupation. We would constitute a perambulatory colony in ourselves and the young people would take care of us if we fell ill,' and Ingpen smiled upon her. 'Let's run away,' he said.

'That's just what one can't do,' said Monica. Whether he were serious or not she could not tell.

'Why not?'

'I don't quite know why not; — but it can't be done; — because of this, I suppose.' She indicated the room behind them. 'The growth; the life. It has its roots; it holds one down; — one would soon wither if one left it.'

'Well — I have no roots; nowhere in all the world have I any roots,' said Ingpen, 'and I'm withered already.'

'So that you can run whenever it becomes too sodden.' She gave him her hand, smiling.

'Yes; I can run. It remains to be seen whether I shall,' said Ingpen.

CHAPTER VIII

SHE did not see Clive or Hester for the next two days. Clive had already made a habit — she had hoped he would feel it so — of stopping to see her on his way to and from the station; light, unemphatic, but reviving moments, allowing no time for any sense of pressure. But he did not come either of those days and she had no glimpse of Hester; who was, no doubt, deeply engaged in feminism at Mrs. Travers's.

From her windows she always watched for Robin being led to and from his school. His shortest way lay on the other side of the green and she had suppressed the desire to call out to him and have him stop; Hester, she felt sure, would not approve of that; but every day the sight of his little figure was a sad solace to her.

She was returning from her afternoon walk on the Tuesday when she saw Robin on the other side of the green with his nurse and she paused for a moment debating whether she might not justifiably cross over and walk beside him to the turning up to The Crofts; and as she told herself that abstention was still her wisest course, since the recent storm

had centred round Robin, she saw that he had seen her and heard his silvery little voice call out: 'Grannie! Grannie!' And leaving his nurse's hand he came running to her across the short thick grass where geese grazed and a group of village dogs wrestled together in the sunlight.

Monica stooped and held out her arms to him. It seemed to her as she enfolded his eager little form that he was far more hers than Hester's. What right had dark Hester to this golden little boy? Only the shape of his eyes reminded her of his mother; the white showing under the iris, as hers did; — the shape of his eyes and the faint tone of olive colour where the gold of his cheek merged into his neck.

'Can't I come and see the fountain, Grannie?' he said, while Nurse followed him smiling. Nurse was a great friend of Monica's, whose attitude towards servants was untheoretic and spontaneous. Hester's relations with hers, she had observed, were not very successful. Hester thought, perhaps, too much of their rights and too little of their happiness; and Nurse, she suspected, was old-fashioned and ignorant like herself and did not like to have Robin made to tell his dreams. 'Can he come in for a moment, do you think?' she asked. 'Is Mrs. Wil-

mott expecting you back immediately?' It was grievous to her, bitterly grievous, that she must ask leave to see Robin.

'I'm sure he can come in for a little, Ma'am,' said Nurse.

Fountains on a lawn, especially on a lawn as small as hers, were very distasteful to Monica, but the cement basin had already been made at the side of the house, where cook and Miriam could see it from the kitchen window, and already the pipes were laid and the sods with which the devastation was to be repaired, piled in readiness. 'We can't make the water play quite yet, I think,' she said, leading Robin by the hand, 'and there's a good deal to do to it still, you see. We must have plants growing round the edge, and some more, perhaps, at the bottom, for the fish to hide in. It will all need consideration. But there's plenty of time; we shan't want to put them in till spring. I only wish we could tell them what is going to happen. It would make the winter pass more quickly for them. — It's lovely looking forward to things, isn't it?'

'Yes; it will make the winter pass much more quickly for us, too, won't it?' He gazed down into the basin. 'What are their names?' he asked.

'The fishes? Well I never thought of naming them. Can you think of any good names?'

'I'd like you to think,' said Robin.

'Shall we call them Milly, Tilly, and Lacey, then?' Robin had loved reading 'Alice.' 'Alice,' she trusted, would not be forbidden, though what the psychological difference between the White Knight and Saint George might be she did not know.

'Milly, Tilly, and Lacey — who were in the well. Yes,' said Robin whose pleasure was always gentle. He gazed thoughtfully down into the empty basin. 'And we'll give them ants' eggs instead of treacle. — Can't we put in some of the plants now, Grannie?'

He had on a little dark blue hat and coat; the shade was not quite right; it was in a softer, more Japanese blue that she had dressed Clive at the same age. Still, in any colour he looked adorable. He stood beside her holding her hand.

'Certainly we can put in a few. There they are, in the pots. I'll get a trowel and fork, and wouldn't you like to cut some flowers for your room, Nurse, while we work? The Michaelmas daisies and chrysanthemums are still lovely.'

It was like being back in Clive's childhood again;

it reminded her of Aunt Janet's, where they had worked together in the garden. Perhaps Hester would allow gardening as her perquisite. Hope was flowering in her once more, with a sense of excitement, of elation, as she went into the little lobby and found the gardening utensils. 'She can't say that gardening and goldfish make him nervous,' she thought. 'His eyes are the same shape as hers, but not in the least the same colour; golden-brown at deepest: while hers are almost black.'

When she returned, drawing on her gardening-gloves, the basket on her arm, she saw that Captain Ingpen was leaning on the gate looking over at Robin, who, all unaware, was earnestly setting the plants in their pots upright around the edge of the basin. She saw him with no faltering in her elation. His presence had lost its element of fear. He had been only kind the other evening, and understanding. She was glad to see him, she knew that, even as she told herself that she must not ask him to stay to tea since Clive, to-day, might stop to see her. But she could ask him in for a little while and going to the gate she opened it, smiling at him and saying: 'Come and help us, won't you? We are making a home for our goldfish.'

Ingpen remained for a moment standing outside. 'Is that the grandchild?' he asked.

'Yes. That is the grandchild. Do come in. — Or are you busy?'

'I'm never busy nowadays. I never shall be busy again. But I didn't stop to get myself invited. I was only passing and saw the little boy, and that he had a look of you. — Not much though. He's more like your son. — It's your fault if I stopped — for having such pleasant things to look at in your garden.'

'But do come in, if you find it pleasant. Robin, this is Captain Ingpen. He is going to help us. Here is your basket, Nurse. Pick anything you like.'

The day was lovely. The pale, high October sky arched benignantly above them; a robin sang and across the green a bonfire was sending up indolent curls of smoke and the spicy scent went with that of the chrysanthemums. Monica, making Robin known to Captain Ingpen, felt a lightness of heart to which she had long been a stranger. This might indeed have been her youth again and this child Clive. It was just so that Clive would have gone forward, shy but courteous, to put out his little hand and say: 'How do you do.'

'But why,' said Ingpen, after shaking hands with Robin, 'if it's a fountain, is there no water?' His worn tweeds touched with leather went with the day; his cap was the colour of old thatch and cast a shadow, like thatch, over eyes bent on the basin but observant of Robin. 'I want to see the water, don't you?' he said.

Robin answered, 'Yes,' and came to stand beside him, attentive to what might result from this potent presence.

'I hadn't thought of water till everything was finished and the fish installed,' said Monica. 'But I don't see why it shouldn't be turned on now. There must be a tap ready.'

'Of course there must. Everything essential is ready as far as I can see. All that's needed are the fountain and the fish. I remember the fish. Shall I go and fetch them, and find the tap on my way back? Your maid will show me,' and Captain Ingpen, on whom nothing, apparently, was lost, turned his eyes on Miriam and cook watching at the window.

'Shall we really put in the fish? Isn't it rather cold for them?' Monica asked, while Robin, between them, turned his gaze from one to the other.

'Not at all too cold; and by the time winter

comes they'll be acclimatized. Your basin is too deep for freezing. Let's set them free by all means. I don't like waiting, do you?' he addressed Robin.

'No; — but not if the fish will catch cold,' Robin said, apprehensive yet trustful, and Ingpen, on his way to the house, replied: 'I understand fish. They won't catch cold.'

'He looks as if he understood, doesn't he, Grannie?' said Robin, when Ingpen had disappeared. 'It will be nicer than waiting for spring, won't it? And you know we might be dead before spring.' Robin certainly had an anxious mind. Monica smiled reassurance at him as she answered: 'We might, though it's not likely; I'm so strong and you're so young. — But it will be much nicer not to wait. — Oh, see! — Isn't it lovely, Robin!' A jet of silver had leaped high into the air.

'There. That's better, isn't it?' said Ingpen. He came from the house carrying the globe of goldfish in his hands and stood beside them to look. The slender silver lance wavered and sprang against the blue and in the basin the water crept higher and higher, reflecting sky and cloud. Robin stood in an astonishment of gladness and over his uplifted face the eyes of Monica and Ingpen met in a look of peace

and understanding. Yes; strange, scarred man; his heart was not ungentle. He understood a child. He understood the day and the fountain's beauty. Monica smiled at him. She would never fear him again.

Now he was giving the globe into Robin's keeping and helping him to tip the goldfish into the water. Their hands, the small and the large, dipped slowly beneath the surface and the dark head and the fair bent together as the fish, amazed, paused at the entrance of their prison and then sped forth. Round and round they went, and, wildly it seemed, from side to side, emblems of happiness, and, looking up at her, Robin whispered: 'Which is which, Grannie? Which is Milly and which is Tilly and Lacey?'

'Robin!' called an icy voice behind them. 'Robin! Come at once! You ought not to be here at this hour!' Icy. Like a sword; cutting down happiness. Monica turned to see Hester looking at them over the hedge. She had come down in haste, for she wore no hat, and she was pale, very pale; and angry; her eyes were the eyes of the indignant Byzantine Madonna. 'Come at once!' she repeated, looking at her child and setting the gate open, adding as she just glanced at her mother-in-law: 'Let

me know, please, when you think of keeping him another time.'

Monica stood silent, gazing at her daughter-in-law. Hester's tone and manner so astonished her that she could find no words.

Ingpen had risen to his feet and in the midst of her disarray Monica noticed that Robin looked up at him, as if for reassurance or protection.

'I met him, Hester. — I thought he might come in for a moment and see the fountain,' said Monica now. She felt her heart throbbing violently in her side. She could not apologize to Hester before Captain Ingpen, yet she was ready to do almost anything rather than display explicit warfare.

'I know. So I see. But you ought to have sent Nurse to tell me. I must always know where he is. Come Robin, do you hear me? — at once.' And Hester, standing still outside it, opened the gate more widely. She had not yet acknowledged Ingpen's presence; now she nodded, coldly, curtly, and muttered: 'How do you do.'

'Run along then, darling. Good-bye for to-day.' Monica kissed the distressed little face.

'Good-bye,' Robin murmured. 'Good-bye,' he repeated, turning to Ingpen and lifting his face to be kissed by him also.

Nurse, alarmed, had come running with her flowers, and saying no further word, Hester took her child by the hand and walked away.

A silence followed this departure. Monica slowly turned and walked down the garden beside her herbaceous border and, after a hesitation, Ingpen followed her. She had come to a standstill at the foot of the lawn when he joined her and was looking out at the fields and hedgerow-elms.

'Shall I go?' he said. 'Or may I say I am sorry for grandmothers?'

Half an hour ago it would have been impossible for Monica to imagine herself allowing Captain Ingpen to say he was sorry. But now their eyes had met in that look of peace. 'My little grandson is nervous; — do you wonder at it?' she said. 'Though I own that I never saw Hester lose her temper with him before.' She tried to speak quietly, but her voice shook with shame and fury.

'She was angry because you had kept him without asking leave,' said Ingpen. 'Isn't it always so — between a woman and her mother-in-law? I don't know anything about these domesticities, but such antagonism seems to me to be inherent in the relationship.'

'And what ought mothers-in-law to do?' Monica

questioned, leaning over to her border and nipping off here and there a withered flower. 'If they don't die when their sons marry — what are they to do?'

'Withdraw, I suppose,' said Ingpen after a pause, watching her.

'Yes, withdraw; that's what I did. That's why I am here, in the country. Only they followed me.'

'Ah, yes; Norah was telling me yesterday that they had just come. — Was that against her will? Your son doesn't look to me a person to force his will on a recalcitrant wife.'

'It was by her will. — It was her idea. — It was on my account they came,' said Monica, and as she broke and broke the withered flowers with fingers in which she felt her anger still thrilling, she wondered at circumstance that had brought her to such confidences. 'I don't understand; I can't understand. — I have never understood her. Perhaps it is my fault. I never saw her lose her temper before. — Perhaps it's my fault. She feels that I don't care for her.'

Ingpen said nothing to that. He remained, taking a few steps here and there on the lawn, watching her while she picked the dead flowers, filling her

hand, pressing them together, tossing them out of sight under the densely growing autumnal plants, and she felt herself quieted by his silent comprehending presence.

'Give up hope; that's your trouble,' it seemed to be saying to her. 'You were foolish enough, my poor friend, to allow yourself hope a little while ago. There's no place for it, at our age. If you didn't go on hoping you would not suffer so.' But he himself said nothing.

Presently they walked back towards the house together. The fountain still held its quivering silver lance against the sky. 'And you think the fish are all right?' said Monica in a deadened voice. 'Robin is a sad little boy. He expects things to die. I don't want to run any risks with the fish.'

'They won't die. They're all right,' said Ingpen absently, his eyes on her. 'He's not like you, the little boy, is he? You expect things to go on.'

'I want them to go on; — something of them to go on — desperately,' said Monica in a low voice. She was betraying herself to Captain Ingpen. She was saying exactly what he expected her to say. But he would not mock her now. He was suffering with her. He walked on with her to the gate. 'Yes. He's sad; but you're desperate,' was what he said.

And looking round at her, with a twist of his bitter smile, he added: 'That's why we understand one another, you and I. Think over what I said. I mean it. Come to France.'

CHAPTER IX

PERHAPS that was really the best thing she could do, Monica thought, sitting at her solitary tea-table in the still room afterwards. Hopelessness was flowing over her, hopelessness of herself, now, more than of the predicament; she herself, she saw it plainly, was, as much as Hester, the predicament. She was too young, too fierce, too unsubmissive to life. She could not give up Clive or Robin, that extension of Clive. As long as they were there and she loved them, she must suffer from the lack of them; and as long as Hester was there she must lack them. Why not make some excuse of health or purse — and go to France; — not with Norah and Celia and Captain Ingpen, that was a friendly absurdity; — but go; — far away; so that she might be removed, and finally removed from Clive's life. Then she could remember him; as if he were dead.

As she was thinking these thoughts — half believing them, but only half — she saw his car drive up. She rose to her feet, pressing her forefinger hard against her lip, and, as she stood there, it was

Robin's face that came to her; Robin startled, frightened, his happiness all broken. That was what Hester had done to Robin; and she must not do it to Clive again. She was always breaking Clive's happiness. It grew up; it sought the light — and she broke it off. It was cruel; she must not be cruel. 'Help me not to be cruel,' she muttered, with the child habit of prayer that had never left her. And, as he came in, she saw that Clive, too, had equipped himself. He was pale, but he was smiling, and he came towards her almost as little Robin had done, almost as if he was calling out to her and wanted her. Then, as he took her hands, his face altered: 'Why, Mummy,' he faltered, 'you've been crying.'

She had not known it. She was unaware of tears in her eyes and on her cheeks. Was it not only that her hot parched gaze betrayed her?

'Crying, Clive?' she, too, faltered.

'Yes — what is it? Oh, Mummy — are you so unhappy?'

They were back, mother and son, in the past; but she now seemed the child, for she was in his arms and the tears had come indeed and though she still heard herself saying, far away, 'Help me not to be cruel,' she was sobbing helplessly.

'What is it? — Oh, Mummy, what is it?' Clive murmured; and his face was full of fear.

'I am foolish. — I mind things so foolishly. — It's only that Hester has been here ——'

As she named his wife she felt that Clive's flesh contracted, contracted and shrank from her; as though she laid hot iron on it, and as she felt him shrink from her the lava flood of her misery heaved and overflowed.

'Hester was angry with me. — Because I kept Robin for a little. I didn't ask him to come. — I knew better than that! — I am well trained. — He called to me and wanted to see the fountain. And Hester came for him and found him with me — and was very angry.'

Stillness was about them. His arms had slipped down from her but he held her hands — tightly — as he intently thought.

'There must have been a misunderstanding,' was what he said.

'I am afraid not. No, there was no misunderstanding.' She drew her hands from his and dried her eyes. Her tears were checked and thoughts — cold, fiery, rapid — sped through her mind, as she scrutinized her peril and the relief of truth; and under her thoughts her heart seemed sinking from her.

'Tell me what happened, will you?' Clive spoke in a dry, deadened voice. He remained standing in front of her, but he looked away; he, too, was taking counsel with himself. 'You have every right to see Robin, of course,' he said. 'That was one of the reasons why we came here; — so that you should see him. — That was one of the reasons Hester wanted to come.'

'How much Hester wants me to see Robin was displayed the other night, wasn't it? She takes away with one hand what she makes a parade of giving with the other.'

'Mummy! Mummy!' he glanced at her askance; but he pleaded with her; he would not face the truth. 'Truly you misunderstood; I promise you did. I asked her about it — about the fairy-tales, you know, at once. I told her I did not agree with her. Of course she was miserable. She had not meant to hurt you. It's only that she cares so about her ideas; — and she's been worried about Robin.'

'She may well be worried about him. He was happy with me this afternoon and when he saw her she frightened him. — It's frightening to a little child to see his mother insult his grandmother.'

'Mother, you are very unfair.'

She had walked away from him in the dusky

room and stood at the window looking out, and his voice, trembling yet austere, followed her. 'You are unfair to Hester. She is not capable of what you think. I mean — Hester may have lost her temper; but she could not have insulted you.'

'I am sorry, Clive. I felt it so; and so did the stranger who, unfortunately, was present — and whose presence did not restrain Hester. Captain Ingpen was there and saw it all.'

'Ingpen! What had he to do with it!' Clive stood where she had left him but his voice was altered and as she turned she saw the frosty anger of his face.

'What had he to do with it? — Your manner is very strange, very unbecoming, Clive. He had nothing to do with it except that he was there.'

'And how did you know what he felt? What right had he to feel anything about you and Hester? I begin to see. I begin to understand. Hester doesn't like him. She came for Robin and found him with that man — and it made her lose her temper. She doesn't like him,' Clive repeated, 'and I wonder you do, Mummy, I do indeed.'

Was it Clive who spoke such words? Clive who thus inconceivably arraigned her, seizing the specious pretext so that he might shield Hester?

'You forget yourself, Clive.' She tried to speak quietly; she was right and Clive wrong; she had the advantage and she must speak quietly. 'Your solicitude for your wife makes you forget yourself. I cannot consent to have my friendships proscribed by you and Hester.'

'Your friendships? Why, you don't know the man! You saw him for the first time the other day!'

'What is that to you, if it was so? One may like a person very much in a day. I have met Captain Ingpen three times and feel him almost a friend.'

'So I see. So I saw the other night. Please remember, then, that he isn't our friend and don't discuss Hester with him — as I gather you have been doing.'

'Very well, Clive; very well. All I have to say, then, is this — and then I will ask you to go: — I have not discussed Hester with him. Hester insulted me in his presence and I saw that he felt it an insult. — But he said not a word against her. It was I who said, to explain, to exculpate — that she had lost her temper: — that is all. I insist on your understanding what passed between me and Captain Ingpen. I have not discussed Hester with him.'

'Very well. Have it as you wish. I will go.'

'One moment more. — Since you and Hester

object to my friends — I have a right to ask you why. What are Hester's objections to Captain Ingpen? and yours?'

Clive had turned on his heel, and now paused, not looking at her: 'Mine were based entirely on what I saw of him. I don't like his manners. — I thought him too — easy.'

'I see. And Hester? You object to his manners and she to his morals, I suppose. I did not know that the modern woman kept our old scruples. I certainly imagined none in Hester. If she has heard stories about his love affairs, or saw irregularities in his past, let me tell you that I am perfectly aware of all that can be said against him.'

'Love affairs?' Clive had now completely turned and was staring bitterly at her. 'Who cares about his love affairs? Hester hardly knew the man. But can't you see for yourself how a reactionary cynic of his type would antagonize her? He sneers at everything she believes in.'

'So I am to be insulted by Hester because my friends are not Socialists and feminists. — What I feel about hers — about Mrs. Jessup and her sister — and Mr. Gales and his mistress — and all the others — I won't go into. — What I have had to put up with at their hands! — If you talk about

manners; — about easy manners! — However —. All that I have to say to you, then, is, that I cannot satisfy you and Hester and forbid Captain Ingpen the house.'

'We won't go on wrangling, Mother. You are talking extravagantly. You know I have not asked you to forbid him the house. All I have asked is that you should not discuss Hester's shortcomings with him. And now I had better be going. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Monica. She turned to the window. She held back wild tears. If only death would take her! He could leave her like this. If only she could die! — But Clive was not gone. He still stood there, behind her. 'Mummy.' That was what she heard. She turned and looked at him. 'Mummy,' he repeated; and she saw the supplication of his face.

'Clive — Clive ——' she faltered, holding out her arms. He came into them. He put his head down on her shoulder. And suddenly she felt that he had broken into sobs. Never, never since his childhood, had she seen Clive weep. He had hidden from her, during those years after the war. The abysses of his suffering were revealed to her as, aghast, yet melted to an ecstasy of tenderness, she

heard the dry, rending sobs. 'Oh — Clive — Clive!' — she murmured. He was in her arms. They had sunken on the window-seat and his face was pressed against her breast; — 'Oh, Clive — what have we been saying to each other — you and I? — Forgive me!'

'No. — It's I. — It's I who have been wrong,' he uttered with difficulty.

'No! No! — I am your mother. It is for me to understand.'

'It's I!' Clive repeated. 'If I were stronger I could make you see.'

'But I do see. — I see that you must be loyal. — I see that you must love your wife. — I should not have spoken as I did. I have been very wrong. — Wrong and disingenuous. — Yes, Clive, disingenuous. It was not as bad as I said. — Not as bad as I felt it to be.'

'Bless you, Mummy. — Bless you for saying it. — She hurt you. She startled you. — I understand what happened. It was because she was hurt and startled. — She is fierce, like you, when she is hurt. — It was only because of him. — She didn't mean to insult you. — Oh, please see that, Mummy.'

'Of course I see it. I saw it when I said it. It was almost a lie when I said it. Words are so dreadful,

Clive. — They pin us down to what we do not really mean. — No; Hester was harsh, peremptory; that was all.' Ardently, with a passionate tenderness, she unravelled the past, forgetting all but her need for unity. 'And — I wish you didn't dislike him — but what you say of Captain Ingpen is true; — I felt that, too, about his manners. I see what you see in him — although I like him so much that when you attacked him it made me angry.'

'Of course it did,' said Clive. 'Of course I see why you like him.' His weeping had ceased. He spoke with utter weariness, his head still leaning against her breast. 'We always see alike. That's the trouble, isn't it?'

'Do we? Always see alike? — Why is it the trouble, Clive?' But, feeling a sudden stillness in him, feeling that she must not probe the avowal of his exhaustion, she said: 'You haven't seen the side of him that I have. He doesn't show it easily. But he is strong and kind. There is something almost beautiful in him, Clive; — though of course he is a bad man.'

'Bad! Darling Mummy!' Clive actually laughed, faintly. It was like wine upon her lips to hear him. 'What a funny Victorian word!'

'I know. But it's true. He has been bad, poor

fellow; perhaps is bad still. — But when one is as old as I am one has a right to like the bad. Oh, Clive — you have made me so happy!'

'Have I, darling? — That's beautiful of you,' said Clive in his exhausted voice.

Yes; she was happy. So long as she could hide herself with him, in him, there could still be happiness; the happiness of closed eyes, stopped ears. Everything was shut out but their nearness. Hester was forgotten. Clive allowed her to forget Hester; — was it because he was so tired? He was so tired that it might have been as if she were to gather him up in her arms and carry him to bed, her little child again.

They sat in silence for what seemed to Monica a long time, a silence so profound that she felt it, at last, lapping insidiously at the ramparts of her contentment. If they were silent for too long they might remember too much and Clive felt that, too, perhaps, for he raised his head, not looking at her, and, lifting her hands, kissed them gently, first one and then the other, holding them clasped in his as he said, finding his words with such care that it was as if he sifted them out and laid them in a symbolic mosaic before her: 'You see, you've always been so much more than a mother.'

'Can one be more, Clive?'

'Yes. Mothers take advantage. You have never taken advantage.'

'Till just now, you mean?'

He sat for a moment longer, holding her hands, then rose, still holding them and looking at her with his gentleness that could be almost stern. 'Perhaps. But it was my fault, too. We put it behind us, don't we? It's forgotten and wiped out. Or, if we must remember — only that because of it we understand each other better. You will help my weakness — that's what I mean, Mummy; because you are my friend as well as my mother.'

'You are not weak, Clive. You are the strongest person I know.' She felt it indeed as she sat looking up at the archangel face, intent with its demand that she should be worthy of his faith in her.

'No,' he said, 'I'm weak because I can't bear things. I lose my footing. It's as if the tide bore me out, or as if my breath gave way. — Perhaps it was the war. — If I could only be tough; — grow another skin; — not feel so much more than there's any good in feeling ——' He broke off. 'All a sort of weakness, you see. — Mummy, I'll go now. Hester will be wondering what has become of me.

— Bless you.' He leaned to her and kissed her. It was as if in leaving her he placed a gift in her hand and closed her fingers upon it, whispering: 'Don't look.'

The moon had risen and the stars come out. She went to the dim clock and saw that it was past seven. Clive had had no tea. Up there at The Crofts Hester must indeed have waited for him, wondering. First the child and then the husband: — Would that be what she would be saying to herself? It was so women's minds moved; poor, wretched women, dramatizing their griefs. To see Hester, with herself, as one of them, brought a pang of actual pity for her. It was good to be able to pity Hester and the balm of her contentment still breathed upon her as she stepped out into the quiet evening, delicious with its smell of darkened earth and fading smoke. She walked up and down the lawn, looking at the stars. What sorrow and what happiness were hers. For the first time she knew the unity brought by shared suffering, and in securing her insight, under the illumined sky, she felt herself, if only for a moment, lay hold of some deep secret of life. Only through such sorrow was such happiness distilled. She must be worthy of it; worthy, or it would melt from her grasp; and it

fell like a thick dew upon her heart while she walked there in the darkness.

Miriam had turned off the fountain but the basin was still brimmed with water and, when she came back to the house, she bent to peer at the goldfish, drowsing, it seemed, three motionless little shadows, among the reflected moon and stars. All would be well with Milly, Tilly and Lacey. Captain Ingpen had promised her and Robin that they should come to no harm and he was a man to be trusted. Robin trusted him. And, thinking now of Robin and of her friend, she turned away and her eye was drawn to a sharp, small glint of light lying on the ground; not a glow-worm at this season, too small, too bright for a glow-worm. She stooped and found Captain Ingpen's ring half embedded in the sods and remembered how he had held the globe under the water with Robin. The ring must have slipped from his finger when he raised himself. She wiped the mud from it and put it on and went into the house, closing her hand upon it, for even for her middle finger it was too large, and to feel it thus recovered and protected warmed her kindliness towards the owner; it was like a piece of his life that she held. He would miss it, for it was a ring he cherished; he was not a man to wear a ring unless it had meaning for him

and he would certainly have felt its loss at once had it not been for Hester's eruption on their halcyon hour. She still thought of him as she went upstairs to dress, remembering that Clive had laughed when she called him a bad man, and taking comfort from the remembrance. Clive had said that he understood her kindness; but that had been a concession to their need of unity. He did not understand it; and he would never like Captain Ingpen. But Clive had not repudiated him, and she must find what comfort she could in that fact, for though she had said in her anger that he should not proscribe her friendships, it had been of Hester, not of Clive, that she had been thinking; she knew that she would find little savour in a friendship repudiated by Clive.

The lamp and candles were waiting for her in her room and she took off the ring and laid it with her own rings on the dressing-table while she washed and changed. And, while she sat between her candles, dressing her hair, she glanced at it once or twice, lying there in the little tumbled heap of pearls and diamonds. It looked old, a mourning-ring perhaps, that had, perhaps, belonged to some ancestor; a sorrowful ring somehow; but then Captain Ingpen was a sorrowful man. That was one reason why she liked him; he understood sorrow.

Perhaps — her thoughts flowed on while she twisted and bound her hair — the reason one felt him bad was because he had never been worthy of sorrow. 'That's the difficulty; — for all of us,' Monica said aloud, and she took up the ring and held it to the light and examined it, and, seeing that it was engraved inside, put on her glasses to look more closely at what might be some quaint posy. But there were only four initials and a date; — not an old date — she bent her head and turned the ring to the light to read: — not 1718 or even 1818; — it was only the other day; only ten years ago: — G. I. from H. B. 1918. — 'G. I. from H. B. 1918,' she repeated slowly, looking up at the candle-flame.

CHAPTER X

CAPTAIN INGPEN called next morning while she was at her letters after breakfast. She had felt sure that he would call early. He would miss his ring and he would hope that no one else would find it, and as she rose to meet him she wondered if yesterday's episode could cover the pallor and fixity of her face; for her sleepless night had ravaged it. It had been with more than a hateful surmise that she had battled; there had been a hope as hateful. She had seen the vast form of a tidal wave rear itself on the horizon and had lain all night wondering whether its crash and engulfing was to sweep Hester out of their lives; — fearing, hoping, hating herself for the hope, yet not knowing whether to fear most or hope most that what seemed a wave was a mere cloud that a word with her friend would dissolve into thin air. If Hester was swept away, Godfrey Ingpen would be swept too; and Clive would be shattered. And as she saw Captain Ingpen and went forward in the bright morning light and smiled upon him, her integrity was restored to her; it was the cloud she hoped for; the cloud that he was to disperse. She waited for him to speak first.

'I hope I am not being tiresome, coming so early,' he said, and he looked exceedingly affable and easy, yet, her perception sharpened to a razor edge, she imagined that he was watching her as she watched him. 'I've lost a ring, an old ring I've worn for years. It occurred to me that it might have slipped off in the fountain yesterday. May I go and have a look?'

Still smiling and still silent, Monica went to the mantelpiece and took the ring from a little porcelain box that stood there. She held it out to him on the palm of her hand: 'I thought it might be yours,' she said.

Ingpen as he came forward was looking not at the ring, but at her. Did she still only imagine that he sounded her dexterity and her disingenuousness? 'Was it in the fountain?' he asked.— 'Thanks, most awfully.' He slipped it on his finger, not taking his eyes from hers.

'No; on the ground, and found by the merest chance. I was walking in the dark and the moonlight struck it. It was half buried already. It's quite possible that by daylight you would not have seen it at all. You might have trodden it under foot and it would have been lost for ever.'

Was he not wishing, with all his heart, that it had

been? For a moment she saw, clearly and horribly, that he did not know what to do; that she baffled him. And she went on, marvelling at her own resource, 'It doesn't look like a man's ring, somehow; it looks like a great-grandmother's ring.' She stood with her back to the mantelpiece facing him, her hands locked behind her.

Ingpen now looked down at the ring and turned it on his finger and smiled, still very easily. 'You are not far wrong,' he said. 'It isn't a man's ring and it belonged to a great-aunt, a racy old lady, very much of a figure in my boyhood. — My mother was brought up by her and she was fond of me. She left me the ring when she died. Harriet Beaton was her name.'

Monica met his eye; his eye with its straight upper lid cutting across the pupil; his eye so candid and so calculating, and as she met it she remembered that he had spent his life dealing with warrior-tribes. Calculating candour had been his frequent weapon. And suddenly she was sick at heart — seeing the tidal wave glide forward, and a trail of fiery mockery sped through her as she thought: 'Ah, my friend, you are as swift, as adroit as I am; — but your memory has played you false. You should have looked, again, at your ring before

you said that. You have forgotten that there is a date engraved inside it.' — Yet — was it just possible that Aunt Harriet Beaton had lived to a great age and died in 1918?

'Well, I must be off. — You are busy,' said Ingpen. There had been a pause, a heavy suspended pause, like a weight held in the air between them, and it seemed to come down with a thud and crash as his voice broke into it. 'There is nothing worse than losing things, is there?'

'No; there's not,' said Monica. She had remained standing on the stone kerb of the fireplace, a little lifted above the floor, so that their eyes were on a level as they looked across at each other.

'I never minded anything so much in my life, I think,' said Ingpen, who had not moved to go and who still turned his ring while he looked at her, 'as losing a dog once, in Marseilles. It was my fault. I had just landed; and there was a great crowd; and I ought to have had him on a lead. I looked for him all day and all night.'

'And you never found him?' Monica asked, after another pause, in which she wondered whether there were some symbolic intention in this reminiscence.

'Yes. I found him. The heat was terrific and he had run all day, half demented I suppose. And he

had been stoned to death. They thought he was mad. A West Highland terrier he was; such a pretty little fellow. They spoiled him horribly.'

Suddenly, while he spoke, thus dryly, Monica saw that strange hot tears had sprung to his eyes. She put her hands before her face, 'Oh. Don't. — Don't.' She did not know what it was she begged him not to do. 'I can't bear it,' she murmured. 'There can't be anything worse.'

'No; there can't, can there?' said Ingpen. 'And I ought to have had him on a lead. It happened twenty years ago, but I wake up in the night and think of it. — Well, good-bye.'

He was gone and she had not uncovered her face. Trembling suddenly, spent, she went to her writing-bureau, sank on the chair and leant her forehead on her hands. What did it mean? What was she to do? Must their friendship be stoned to death? She sat there, for how long? motionless, except that from time to time she moved the papers on her desk — glancing at them from under her hand: Edith's letter about the invalid child; — she must answer that; it had to be sent to the sea: the coal bill; — it must be cut down; the kitchen range was very wasteful; it might save money to get a new one: the tickets for the English Association lecture and the

long envelope from the Bank with the certificates to be signed.

But was it possible, really possible, that for all these years Hester had lived a lie? Must she choose between stoning the poor lost dog and tacitly sheltering Hester and her former lover, assenting to the deception, making part of it? She, too, to lie to Clive and keep him in his fool's paradise? Oh, loathsome, hateful girl, creeping surreptitiously into their lives like a hidden fire, sitting there in her black cloak, extraordinarily quiet — like an octopus in the dark, holding its prey. And as the memory came, half suffocating her with the horrible old sense of hatred, it lighted a sudden shape unseen till then, yet evident, substantial, once made visible. How far did the betrayal go? Was it not only in the past but in the present too? Was the contempt, the hostility displayed by Hester towards Ingpen and expressed to Clive, merely a blind and subterfuge, merely part of the murky artifice? Was it all planned and plotted between them? His coming, and theirs, at the same time? — Their coming down Hester's idea, as Clive had assured her. — How impossible, now that she saw it, to think otherwise; — though the thought tore at her heart as she saw it sweeping Ingpen, too, into the murk and foulness.

— Oh, this could not be borne! This was too much to bear! And it might still not be true; for there was Aunt Harriet and, her arms laid out before her on the desk, her hands clenched, Monica stared at Aunt Harriet — the racy old lady with grey side curls and stiffly flowered silk dress. Even if Aunt Harriet were fiction — even if she were fiction, he would be justified in dexterity to shield a friendship innocent, passionate and shattered. 'It still may not be true,' Monica muttered, rising to her feet. 'They may have been friends, great friends.' And she stared out of the window and saw now, not the nebulous figure of Aunt Harriet, but Ingpen's eyes fixed upon her, measuring her suspicion, measuring her knowledge, asking himself: 'Has she read the inscription?' Oh, no! No! The ring had its history. 1918. During the war. What did the phrase bring back? Chartres and the muffled windows; Ingpen's head bent to the engravings in the hall; Hester's repudiating, sullen eyes as she said it was like a skull. They had been at Chartres together and Ingpen, ten years ago, would have been engaged in no platonic friendship with a girl of twenty-two, a girl who could look as Hester looked the other night; — and she flashed on Monica's eye naked and silver and rose, in the new dress chosen for the old lover.

How wonderfully they had acted. How marvellously. She was a loathsome girl, and she had known it from the first; and he a conscienceless, a crafty man; and she had known that from the first; — although he had smiled at her over little Robin's head, with the released fountain shining above them; — although the strange, hot tears had come to his eyes in telling of his little dog. — 'It's not to stone him. — What did he mean by that? — It's not to stone him — if I must see the truth.' She pressed her hand to her forehead standing in the sunlight that flowed warmly about her. — 'I must see the truth: because of Clive. Then I can judge. If they are here together — betraying Clive — they must go; they must both go.' And still the tearing was at her heart, and she remembered his tears and saw, not his dog now but her own little Jeremy, who had died so quietly with his head laid in her hand. — Was that not all that he had asked of her?

She felt now that her tears were trickling from beneath her fingers and that they brought a lassitude, almost an appeasement. — Death, peaceful death; the thought of death, of rest, had often of late come to her mind. All that there was to do, all that remained of life, was to think of Clive, to secure him. And she was to see Norah that afternoon;

— the memory had come with the tears and the sense of appeasement; she could find out from Norah whether Aunt Harriet had ever existed. That was the first step. But she must lie down; for she felt as though she had passed through a long illness.

CHAPTER XI

IT was only half-past three when she started, and she would be half an hour too early for Celia and Norah's tea-party, but they would be glad to see her and there would be thus an opportunity to make some casual enquiry about Aunt Harriet. Clive and Hester were to come, and Captain Ingpen would surely be there: more surely because of this morning; his was the task of nonchalance and unawareness; all that was left him to do was to watch her and to hold his hand, hoping that by some stroke of fortune she would be baffled and perhaps satisfied. Her heart was sick and heavy in her side as she thought of him, and with him now came the thought of Jeremy and of the other little dog; — but the lassitude that had fallen upon her tumult was in itself a strength. What she needed was stillness and calm; and it gave her this. She could promise herself that even the sight of the three together, Hester, Ingpen and Clive,— would not make her quail, and as she stepped out into the sunlight, the heavy beating of her heart, the bright hot sun, brought back, by some odd trick of association, just such another day in London, twenty-five years ago, when she had set

forth down the dusty little street in West Kensington to make her way to the unknown London of the City and publishers' offices for her first business interview. She had been horribly frightened, no doubt, though not until this minute had she known it — so armed had she been with Clive and Winchester and Oxford — and looking back, really understanding at last that girl of twenty-five years ago, she saw her as incredibly ignorant of herself and of life. Until then she had only seen life from the deck of a ship, her father's gallant craft, with its stout engine throbbing beneath one, its pennons flying above. But now her father was dead, and she was to know what it was to swim in the open sea alone, and the first intimation of the contrast had come to her from the manner of the editors who received her. Until then, in her relations with men, she had met with implicit homage, with deference or assiduity, and had taken them for granted as a woman's due. It was revealed to her, now, in the cool jocose eye, the note of familiarity that greeted her, that to the employing male a woman in search of work was in a very different category from a woman secure and independent. The editor was kind and had agreed to take her series of articles on the French countryside; but her cheek had oddly

burned as, not waiting for the lift, she had run down the steep, echoing stone staircase. Things, perhaps, were better for women now; — because of Hester and her kind. And as she paused thus, looking back into the past, she saw Hester approaching her from across the green.

Hester had just come down from The Crofts and was evidently arrayed for the tea-party in her best dark blue coat and skirt. She wore a red silk jumper and a small red hat, and, among the geese and ducks and care-free dogs, advanced with steady deliberation. Monica stood still at her gate, fixing her with a guarded eye. Her instinct that morning in meeting Captain Ingpen had been well justified; she had waited for him to speak first. She would wait for Hester to speak first now.

There was no hesitation in Hester's demeanour and, as far as Monica could perceive, no calculation. Her eyes were set in mauve circles, almost as though she had wept — but Monica could not imagine that Hester had been weeping — and the ageing lines that ran along her cheeks were apparent and seemed to drag at the corners of her mouth with a bitter savour. And what she said at once — what she had come to say — was: 'I am very sorry about yesterday, Monica. Clive told me that you felt I

had been rude. I didn't mean to be and I beg your pardon.'

So unexpected were these words, so astonishing to Monica's ear, that for a moment she felt that Hester had struck her between the eyes. She stood there stunned. Then, as the singing in her head subsided, she saw a clue given into her hand. Hester suspected nothing and, because she was unsuspicious, might reveal everything. Her apology was part of her plot. How little it could cost her to apologize to Clive's mother when she had everything to gain by keeping him quiet. It was of Clive she was thinking. She would never dream, Monica was sure of that as she looked at her, of casting him off. She intended to keep husband and lover. Monica felt herself armed and she seized her opportunity. 'That's very nice of you, Hester, very nice indeed,' she said; 'I *was* rather startled.' And she went on, not too casually — for of course Hester would see that she intended to make herself disagreeable: 'But really — after what Clive told me, I perfectly understand. It wasn't really me you were angry with at all, was it? — though of course at the moment I could not be expected to see that'

Hester's eye lighted from its brooding calm. It fixed itself on her mother-in-law and the sullen,

dragging line in her cheek deepened. 'What Clive told you? What has Clive got to do with it?' she questioned haughtily.

'Why — he has everything to do with it. He found me very much upset; and he was upset, too. He was as much at sea as I was really — to account for your temper, though he felt sure that I misunderstood you; — but when I told him that Captain Ingpen was there, everything became clear. Your dislike of him — because of the past — was so intense.'

Ah. That did draw the blood! Not a shred of doubt — or of hope — survived in Monica as she seemed to see it trickle, as though from a dagger blow. This was to taste, in one sharp moment, knowledge and hatred and vengeance. For Hester was white to the lips. White, with the gauntly circled eyes, as she stood there and as she said: 'Because of the past? What do you mean? I don't understand you.'

No; she did not; nor should she. Hester should be left to grope, irate, perplexed and meshed, until she tumbled into the pit dug for her.

'Why, you had known him — very well, I suppose,' said Monica. 'And I suppose you had quarrelled with him, since the sight of him could dis-

compose you as much as it did yesterday, and the other night. I understood the other night, too, and your behaviour to me then, after what Clive said.'

Hester carried a small, stumpy sunshade — a red sunshade that matched her hat and jumper (all was very nicely thought out) — and now her hands grasped it tightly and fiercely, as fiercely as though she restrained herself from hurling it at her mother-in-law's head. — 'Clive never said it! Clive could not have said such a thing! I never spoke of him to Clive!' she exclaimed, and her lip lifted from her teeth as she clenched them in what was almost a snarl of fury. The blaze of the conflagration was indeed revealing. A wide landscape, till then unseen, leaped into view. Clive had not dared to tell his wife of his surmise. His mother remembered now how deep had been his discomposure. Clive, too, had his intuitions. And through it all — all that she was seeing — Monica was aware that Hester, at all events, was telling no lies and that, illumined by the lurid moment, she was looking almost beautiful.

She could not pause for Hester's beauty. She held her thought steady, like a sword in her hand, and its edge was in her voice as she said: 'That's very strange: That shows Clive's insight. I did not

gather from him how long or how well you had known Captain Ingpen, but what he made me see was that you disliked him so bitterly that you could not control yourself in his presence. If you had said nothing at all of him to Clive, it only shows us how deeply he felt it for himself. He understands you through and through, doesn't he, Hester? You are touched, I am sure, by such devotion and such insight.'

The eyes of the Byzantine Madonna were on her as she uttered these penetrating phrases; the old image reasserted itself and Monica found herself wondering at them, the great irises almost encircled with white, so wide, so fixed was their ominous stare; down at her; across at her; as if from high up, as if through the half-pagan, half-sacred darkness of a vast basilica. Stonily, repudiatingly, Hester stared at her and, in all her cruel security, Monica felt as if a rigid hand had been thrust out from hieratic vestments to push her away, to strike her down, to annihilate her. 'You know nothing about Clive and me,' said Hester, 'absolutely nothing. You never have. I am not touched. He had no right to say such things to you and not to me.'

'No right to defend you? No right to tell his mother that he understood his wife?' Monica found

the words with difficulty. Her sword had been turned in her hand.

'I don't need defences,' said Hester, moving now away. 'When I want Clive to defend me with you, I'll tell him so. He has no right to make up stories about his wife in order to placate his mother and then to conceal from her what he has been doing. — But that side of it concerns him and me; — not you. — That is all I have to say.' She walked off towards the station road.

'You remember, perhaps, that Celia and Norah expect you to tea?' Monica slightly raised her voice to follow her with an icy conciseness. 'I understood that you and Clive were coming.'

Hester paused to listen, her back to her. 'I perfectly remember,' she said, not turning her head. 'I don't care to come. I don't care to smile and pretend after this scene; you give me too much of it to do as it is. I shall take the train to town and not get back until after dinner: — you may tell Clive so if you see him. I am not such an actress as you are.' She walked rapidly away.

'Well, there's that.' Monica heard herself utter the absurd comment as she stood still and watched Hester disappearing round the corner of the road. 'There's that,' she repeated and, slowly turning, she

walked in the opposite direction. She felt struck, stunned, rather than enraged; and after she had walked for a little while it came over her that a sick admiration for Hester coloured her detestation. Yes, Hester undoubtedly was guilty, and had been her victim, or, rather, her trapped quarry; yet, without insolence, without retort, could any creature have contrived more indubitably to preserve dignity in overthrow? She had avowed nothing; she had denied nothing. 'She hasn't a fibre of weakness in her; or of meanness,' Monica thought, hardly aware of the strangeness of such a tribute at such a moment. 'I almost understand why they both fell in love with her.' Something inviolate, unconquerable in herself recognized and did homage to the strength of her mortal enemy.

It was already half-past four when she reached Norah's, and she saw Celia in the garden, bareheaded, in a very lovely little grey dress. Here was Celia and Hester was walking away to the station. It almost seemed to Monica, as she opened the gate and went in, that Hester was walking out of their lives. After her anguish, her lassitude, her stupefaction, it was now an oblivious blitheness that overtook her; the reckless mood of a fairy-tale make-believe. Here was Celia; Clive would soon be here

and everything was to end happily as it ought to have done years and years ago.

'Well, my dear child,' she said, going up to her. 'What delicious weather — and you match it. — That darling dress. — Where is Norah? Are you expecting anyone except just ourselves?'

'Only the tiniest little tea-party — for Clive and Hester; — Captain Ingpen, Mr. and Mrs. Fellows, Rosemary Dixon and Lady Tyler. Norah is in the drawing-room with Lady Tyler now. She came early so that she could go early. She has a meeting at the other side of the county, as usual, and she's talking Women's Institutes, as usual. I'm afraid poor Norah will have to be Secretary after all. Her hens won't exonerate her,' laughed Celia, who was merry to-day. 'Your dress is a darling, too, Monica,' she went on, clasping her hands on her friend's arm. 'You are dazzling in black and white, — only that's too violent a word for anything so soft and bright. — You are like Helen of Troy, as Clive always said — there's something so ageless, so "is this the face" about you, and you always smell of violets,' Celia sniffed at her cheek. — 'I'm sure Helen did too — fresh violets out of the wood. — Oh, Monica, isn't it your doing that Captain Ingpen is going to plant all sorts of lovely things in his

wood — for the spring? I am sure it is; it's such a dull wood now; nothing grows there you know except a few bluebells. Won't it be too wonderful to pick anemones and primroses? He says we shall. — Norah thinks he is really settling in and beginning to like it here, and if he is it must be because of you.'

A pang shot through Monica's heart as she heard the happy babble. Was it possible — even yet — that it was because of her? Was it the tired dog laying its head in her hand? But for Clive, how little power the past would have had to harm the present, if that were so. A dark confusion hung before her eyes, obscuring Celia and the light fairy-tale, bringing back the thoughts of the wood; — that apprehension of leaving Clive behind her if she went on with Captain Ingpen. To stay her hand now would be to leave Clive behind; it would be to betray Clive if she paused to listen to the voices of pity and tenderness that whispered in her heart. He was a crafty, an ambiguous, an unscrupulous man, and she remembered suddenly — Celia's fond words of praise brought it back, placing her in a category where beauty still had power — that a thread of flame had passed between them, quenched from all rising, as if by a pressure from her foot, yet, per-

haps, leaving her not unscathed. 'Yes; look deep into your complicity,' she told herself, while she walked so calmly, held by Celia, and seemed to listen to her; for was it not complicity to understand, even though she had quenched the thread of flame, why Hester had loved him desperately and loved him, perhaps, as desperately now? — to understand, even, why she loved him more than Clive?

There was no flame in Clive, was that it? He was light, not fire; he illumined, he did not burn; and did she not understand the deep craving to perish, if need be, in the flame? She felt herself tremble inwardly as her thought, so coldly it seemed, gazed at Captain Ingpen's ambiguous homage. Yes; he was an unscrupulous man, for he had come seeking the old passion and had dared to pause and offer homage on his way.

'Did Clive tell you that he took me for a drive on Saturday?' Celia said. 'Robin came too and sat on my lap and we had a dear talk. It made me feel,' Celia smiled round at her with unclouded candour, 'that everything might come back again. I had tea with him and Hester afterwards and she was so sweet to me, in her funny, terse way. I know that Clive hopes very much we are to be friends.'

It would satisfy Celia to be illumined. She

craved no flame. Monica's mind still followed the probing simile while she asked, schooling her voice: 'Do you feel that possible?'

'Perfectly possible. I feel as if it had begun already,' said Celia. 'We might never have made friends in London, but we may be friends here in the country. Her London, I mean, could never be mine, but her country may be. It's quite different, isn't it? One wants such different things in the country.'

'One always wants affinity, I think.'

'But affinity grows, Monica. And funny little things can make it grow. — I've never really seen Hester in her own home before,' said Celia, her eyes on her friend. 'And she showed me her new dress, that red and silver dress she got for your dinner; I never imagined Hester showing her dresses or caring about them, but she ran up to fetch it, when Clive asked her to — so eager and pleased — and she looked at me with such an earnest, wistful look, and said: "Do you think she'll like it?" as though she were outside and wanted to come in. And I felt such a queer little pang, Monica, for I knew you wouldn't really like it; — that it wasn't a bit your sort of dress. And when you feel pangs for people, it makes you fond of them.'

'So you are already fond of Hester. That is indeed a great step towards friendship.' Monica could not quell the irony of her voice. The emotion with which she heard Celia's guileless recital, touched with the breathless, headlong quality as it was — brought a sudden heat to her cheek. 'I certainly didn't like the dress; it was a dress suitable to the stage rather than to my little drawing-room; but I very much admired Hester in it; as did everyone present.'

Celia, arrested in her advocacy, looked at her askance. It reminded her of Clive's look the day before.

Norah called them in to tea. The Fellows had arrived and Rosemary Dixon who bred Angora rabbits and read French memoirs. Monica sat down by Lady Tyler, a lean-faced woman harassed yet stimulated by unnecessary public cares. Her garden was her relaxation and Monica asked her at once about her gladioli so that there should be no danger of hearing about some new committee, and as she talked, her thought passed to and fro over the pictures Celia had put before it; Hester displaying her dress and pretending that it had been bought to please her: — Clive and Celia driving with Robin. Perhaps, on that Saturday, Hester and Ingpen had

already met and laid their plans. It would be part of their plan that Clive should often take Celia out for drives; with Robin.

Mr. Fellows, the rector — a devout, submissive man who had lost three sons in the war — was passing the tea and as Lady Tyler hastily quaffed her cup and rose, saying she must fly to her meeting, Monica saw Clive's face appear in the doorway, Clive's radiant face. She remembered, as she met his eager eyes, that they had parted in love and trust only yesterday and with painful effort her mind constructed the full meaning of his radiance. He had sent Hester to her with her apology. He believed that it had been understood and accepted, reconcilingly. He expected to find Hester with her now and as his smile, sharp and shining, found and rested on her, her eyes dropped before it.

'You're late, Clive,' said Celia, 'and so is Captain Ingpen. — Is Hester with you?'

She had joined him and already his smile was stiffened to the cold attentiveness.

'She was coming with Mummy,' he said. 'No tea, thanks; I had some in the city before starting. — Is she following you, Mummy? — You *have* seen Hester?'

'Yes; I've seen her.' They were standing there

before her. What could she do for Clive? What could she do for herself? Until she could see him alone all that she could do was to present him with a clear surface. She prayed that she kept it clear as she looked up at the two before her and went on: 'She didn't come with me and asked me to tell you that she was going to town and wouldn't be back till after dinner. — Perhaps you and Celia will come and dine with me — since you'll be alone. — Robin will be all right with Nurse, won't he?'

And now, as she felt the intentness of their gaze, she remembered that she had said no word to Celia of Hester's defection and knew that Celia as well as Clive scented disaster.

'But — didn't she? — I mean —— Hadn't Hester anything to say to you?' Clive's light was all extinguished. 'Don't go, Celia.' He laid a hand on the girl's shoulder as she made a movement to leave them. He took refuge in Celia, who understood him and Hester; who, already, was fond of Hester.

'Yes; stay, Celia,' said Monica, glancing at the girl's pale face. 'It was dear of you to send her, Clive, and we had quite a little talk. Perhaps she had some message calling her to town? She seemed quite decided about it. — Though I reminded her of the tea.'

To see Celia standing there under Clive's hand gave her a cutting comfort. It put her out, but it kept them, and the future, together. It was well, even if it put her out, that he had Celia to turn to.

'I don't understand,' he muttered.

'It's bad of Hester,' Celia tried to help them both as best she could, 'because the tea-party is really given for her; but we know what a busy person she is. Probably it was a message. Mrs. Travers may have sent for her, Clive. You know she said on Saturday that Mrs. Travers was in some difficulty.'

'Yes. Perhaps it is Mrs. Travers.' Clive looked at her unseeingly. 'But I don't think so. I don't think I'll dine, Mother' (he called her 'Mother') — 'I think I'd rather wait for Hester at home. Shall we have a little turn in the garden, Celia? Isn't it rather hot in here?'

'May I come — alone?' Celia stooped to her to ask it. But it was less to ask than to look her tenderness, to implore her to take heart.

'The truth is that my heart is broken, Celia' — that was what Monica felt she would have liked to reply. Even if Clive were to understand all and to forgive all, how was she to forget that he could look at her like that, with that pallid alienation? He saw her as cruel; he believed her vindictive. She had

driven his beloved to strange, uncharacteristic strategems, and as he and Celia left her Monica heard an echo of her own specious voice as it had found the prevarications which were all that she could give him.

She sat now alone in the drawing-room. The evening was marvellously warm and still and all the others were in the garden. It was part of old age, Monica thought, closing her eyes and leaning her head against the piano, that one could never tell anybody that one's heart was broken. No one cared if old hearts broke; it was taken for granted that they must break; and in silence.

She was suddenly aware that somebody was looking at her. It was as if a presence had, soundlessly, entered the room, and opening her eyes she saw Ingpen's face outside the window. The sky behind his head was like the sky in an early Italian picture; pale yet deep in tone, still, remote and merciful; his head was dark against it and his face featureless. She only felt his intent gaze and knew that it had searched and summoned her. It was so a ghost might look in on one and she must look like a ghost to him, gazing back, with her sorrowful face, from the dusky room. So they might always remember each other, the future, not the past, thus taking

spectral shape between them. 'Everything fades,' she thought. But this would not fade, for it had never lived. They had never meant more to each other than this interchange could give them. This was their reality.

He was gone. He would not come in. He would not obtrude the jarring world of time on the moment of possessed eternity. It was strange to know of this man whom she must judge, condemn, and thrust forth, how deeply, where eternity was concerned, she could trust him.

Voices of farewell were passing along the little path that led to the garden gate and in a moment Norah entered, exclaiming: 'Why, are you all alone, Mrs. Wilmott? I thought Uncle Godfrey was with you. He must have gone as soon as he came; — what's the matter with him? My tea-party was rather a failure, I feel, with him and Hester away. Clive has driven Celia off to see the sunset from the hill and she's dining with you, she says. They asked me to say they'd come back for you.'

Her heart might be broken but it could still rouse itself and even feel again a stir of the fairy-tale as she heard Norah's cheerful tones. After all, why not? Without phantasy, was not everything moving in that direction? All her standards, all her tastes

and traditions, shrank from hateful public rendings; but Hester had walked away; and that ghost at the window had no power over the present. Why should not beautiful things grow up where old things had been blasted?

'I won't wait for them,' she said. 'I would really rather walk back on this lovely evening, and I must tell the maids that Celia is dining. — Won't you come too, Norah? — The hill over The Crofts, you mean?'

'Yes. The sunset is lovely from up there. No; I won't dine, thank you so much. — I've masses of letters to write and Celia loves a *tête-à-tête* with you. — It's rather wonderful to see everything turning out so well, isn't it? You were right and I was wrong about that, do you remember? Celia and Hester seem really to have taken a fancy to one another,' said Norah. 'And little Robin calls her Aunt Celia. — She was very much touched.'

'Darling Celia. — Do you remember Sonia, in "War and Peace"? Like Celia rather. The destined aunt type. Perhaps that is what we must resign ourselves to for her.' Monica got up as she spoke and moved about the room, remembering as though from far away that there were still steps to be taken and clues to follow before the key was in her hand; the key to set Clive free.

'I don't find it in the least mournful to be an aunt!' Norah laughed. 'All this talk about frustrated maternity amuses me. Some of the jolliest people I've ever known have been aunts. — It all depends, like everything else, on whether you have any money of your own.'

The clue was given into her hand and Monica heard her own voice saying: 'Speaking of aunts, hadn't you a rather wonderful one in your family? — An old Aunt Harriet Beaton? This picture isn't of her by any chance? — I was hearing about her the other day.' She had stopped before a faint pencil drawing of an old lady in a cap.

'Well — how did you hear of Aunt Harriet!' said Norah, and Monica's heart gave a great throb as she heard her — whether of hope or fear she did not know: 'No; that's not she. I've no picture of Aunt Harriet. She *was* rather wonderful; but her name was Allington, not Beaton; we have no Beatons in the family. Mother used to tell us stories about her. She travelled all over the world and made botanical paintings of flowers in every quarter of the globe. Mother has portfolios full of them.'

Monica heard her own weak voice again. 'A great traveller? — Perhaps your uncle inherits the taste from her. Yes; that is she. I muddled the

name. Was she very old when she died? Did you ever see her?'

'I? See her? How could I? She was mother's great-aunt and died before I was born,' said Norah.

So the key was in her hand and heavy was its weight. If only he had said nothing, nothing at all, she thought, as she walked along the darkened lanes, there might still have been a loophole; but not now. One did not lie like that without a reason.

It was dark when she reached home. The curtains had been drawn and chinks of light showed between them. Wondering at the foolhardiness that had impelled her to ask Clive and Celia to dine, she paused at the gate to draw breath. Now she had Celia to face for the evening and she did not know how she was to bear it.

As she dressed she heard the car drive up and then drive off again, in the direction of The Crofts; Clive returning to wait for Hester. And in the drawing-room Celia waited for her, holding her violin, and Monica understood in a moment all that had happened as she said, not able to control the breathlessness: 'Hester was up there, Monica. She had come back and was up there on the hill: looking at the sunset, too. — And, oh, Monica — please forgive me — but did anything happen, between

you and Hester, I mean? — Because they are very unhappy; she and Clive are unhappy. She is angry with him, I'm afraid; — because of what happened. — Could you tell me, do you think? Do you think I could help a little? — Because I feel as if I understood you all and could, perhaps, make things clearer.'

For one moment, as she looked at her, Monica knew the wild impulse to break down before Celia, to tell her all, to ask, indeed, her help and sympathy: but, steadying her mind, as if over a whirlpool vortex, she said, in a cold voice: 'Yes; I think something did happen, Celia, and perhaps, some day, I shall be able to explain what seems strange to you. But I can't talk about Hester and Clive now. Not till I've seen Clive again, alone. We must find other topics. — Only this I'll say: — Hester had no right, not the shadow of a right to be angry with him. Nothing passed between Hester and me that gave her a right to be angry with Clive. Don't try to intercede for her, my dear. When I tell you my story you will feel, I think, that it is Clive and I, not Hester, who are in need of pity.'

CHAPTER XII

MONICA knew when she waked next morning that her ordeal was close at hand. Last night had been a foretaste of it, though she and Celia had taken refuge in music and had played persistently for an hour after their silent dinner. There was now the long day to be got through before she could see Clive, and her bruised and trembling heart shrank from the heavy hours. She wrote letters all morning; sprightly letters, wondering at herself as she turned the crisp sentences and made the merry quips. She sat down to her piano and doggedly practised the passages where she had failed last night. And after lunch she started for a long walk, telling Miriam that she would not be back till after tea-time. Clive might stop to see her on his way from the station. If he did not come she would send for him. She was fixed on that. She would not pass another night with this spectre between them. To-night, before they slept, she and Hester and Clive should know all. And meanwhile she could walk and walk.

The afternoon lights were slanting over the quiet stubble fields when she came, after a round that had

led her through miles of country, to the little wood behind The Crofts where the primroses grew in spring. She had walked blindly, not caring where she went, and when she found herself now so near Hester, she knew a moment of panic. Not for anything must Hester see her.

She left the wood and climbed the hill with hurrying footsteps, following a sheep-track that led to the summit, where Clive and Celia had come last night, and sitting down to rest for a moment she retraced the scene; Hester's dark form reclining here, her angry eyes as she had raised herself and watched the two approach her. What had Hester felt on seeing them there, so confidently together? Had not a dim presage crossed her mind of her own dispossession? And how had she dared show anger towards Clive?

From where she sat she could see Oddley Green below her, her little house with its curling smoke and the thin line of the fountain on the lawn; all the roads laid out and the railway line with its bordering copses; and then her eye was drawn suddenly near; for there, appearing over the crest of the hill, was little Robin in his blue linen smock, walking slowly towards her, as if in sad meditation. Robin was a sad little boy; she thought it again as she watched

him. The deep flaw in his parents' union revealed itself, perhaps, in the child's gravity. It was as if he felt a lack in the very air he breathed. He did not see her until he was quite near, and then, after looking at her in amazement, he ran forward and threw himself into her arms.

'My darling,' said Monica, enfolding him and looking into the troubled little face — 'what are you doing up here all by yourself?'

'Mummy lets me come here by myself sometimes,' said Robin after a moment; 'we often come up here together. It's Nannie's afternoon out today, you see.'

'Yes. — But does Mummy know you are up here now — alone?' Monica smoothed back the fair hair from his forehead.

'No,' said Robin, after a hesitation, 'she doesn't know. But she told me to run away. She's crying.'

'Crying!' Monica's voice could not control its sharpness. 'Why?'

Again Robin hesitated, as though inhibitions too mature for his years strove with the childish hungering for comfort. Then his own eyes filled with tears and he lifted them to his grandmother, saying: 'I liked that Captain; he made the fountain go and put in the fish, and I liked him. But why does he

make Mummy cry? — He's with her down there now.'

Monica felt her blood stand still. With her down there now: and Hester was crying.

'Well, you see,' she said, finding calm words among blazing thoughts, 'Captain Ingpen and Mummy are old friends and old friends often have sad things to talk of. — If I were you, darling' — she was thinking intently and while she thought she still stroked Robin's hair and looked into his eyes, 'I would run back home now and go quietly into the nursery, and wait for Mummy there. She would not like to think of you wandering about like this.'

'But I'm not wandering. I'm with you,' said Robin.

What truth was this, uttered by the innocent lips? With her. Her arm held him more closely, while her blazing thoughts paused and scorched her and her mind, so girlish still, so inexperienced, shrank from the visions that Robin's words had set before her. She rose to her feet involuntarily and keeping Robin's hand stood gazing down at the fading October day. Hester had no right to Robin.

'Darling, I think you had better come back with me,' she said. 'Mummy is busy with her friend and Daddy would rather you were with me, I feel sure.

Perhaps you could spend the night with me. — Wouldn't you like that, Robin?'

He gazed up at her with his pure eyes. 'But I can't leave Mummy,' he said.

A flush rose to Monica's cheek. She felt herself rebuked. 'Of course not,' she said. 'Only till Daddy comes. He will fetch you.'

'Won't you come home with me?' said Robin after a moment. 'Won't you come to the nursery and sit with me and wait for Mummy, too?'

'No. I can't do that!' Monica exclaimed, to herself, rather than to the child. 'You come with me till Daddy fetches you.'

'Mummy wouldn't like it,' said Robin, still eyeing her; and as she looked down at his firm sad face she saw Clive in him; Clive's strength. 'She doesn't like me to go unless she knows.'

'But she told you to run away.'

'She didn't mean so far away. She meant the nursery. Perhaps she'll be there now, Grannie. I think I'll go back and see.'

Little angel; little faithful, trusting angel; loyal like his father, and betrayed like him. What was there to do but yield to such innocence? She stooped and kissed his forehead. 'Very well, darling; if you feel that. Yes; run home.'

When she had seen him disappear over the brow of the hill she turned and walked swiftly down to Oddley Green. She was trembling, shuddering with fury and as she went her walk insensibly became a run. She felt like a hare with the hounds at its heels, and a terror was upon her that before she reached safety she might see Ingpen.

Clive's car stood before her cottage. He was waiting for her. He was there, standing at the window, watching her, as she came up the path.

She stood for a moment in the hall and put her stick very softly into the stand, as though afraid of waking someone. As she entered the drawing-room Clive turned to her from the window but he did not move towards her. Miriam had set the tea-table in readiness; the kettle whispered on its stand. Absurdly, grotesquely, she heard herself saying, as she paused by the door and glanced at her son: 'Will you have some tea?'

'No, thanks,' said Clive. He did not move. He watched her as she sank down on a chair beside the door. 'I want to talk to you, Mother,' he said. 'Are you too tired? Would you rather go up and rest first? I can wait. I can wait for as long as you like.'

'No; I am not too tired,' said Monica. She could

sit upright on the chair and she certainly could not go and rest while he waited.

Clive leaned back against the window-frame, his arms folded. 'It's this,' he said. 'You are cruelly unfair to Hester; and you always have been.'

'Yes; I see. Yes; — I thought that was what you were going to say,' said Monica. 'Won't you sit down, Clive? You look tired.'

'No; I'd rather stand. — You do own it, then. You do see it. From the very beginning it has been,' said Clive. 'And from the very beginning it has spoiled everything.'

'Not everything, Clive? You have had your happiness. She didn't see.'

'No; that's true. Hester didn't see. She's simpler than you and I are and she didn't expect to be cared for; didn't ask it, or didn't think it made any difference. That was a little stupid of Hester,' said Clive, and across the room the white sincerity of his face flashed at her like a sword. 'She had never met a relation like ours. Her own family life had been wretched. She didn't in a way take parents seriously; just as a girl of her type doesn't take the past seriously; doesn't know that it counts, counts horribly, in the present. They are stupid in that

way,' Clive repeated, staring down for a moment at the floor.

'Then, since she was too stupid to see, what do you blame me for?' asked Monica. This was all irrelevant; this was all enmeshing; but she must let Clive speak. She could not strike him down among these thickets of misunderstanding. But the briars sprang up with every word she uttered and Clive was eyeing her with a look of scorn as he answered: 'She did see. She began to feel I was unhappy. She was not too stupid to feel that, though I tried to hide it from her. I tried to hide from you both, to pretend to you both that you got on and that I was contented with your relation. I thought that if I went on pretending long enough it might grow; you might begin to see her a little more truly, and do her some degree of justice. But Hester saw what you failed to see; that I was wretched. And how are we to go on now, when you show her as well as me that you hate her?'

Monica sat silent, her eyes on the floor. It was true that she hated Hester now; it was perhaps true that she had hated her from the beginning; and with reason. Clive was looking at her but she could not look at him, and if he had had a lingering hope it died then, for she denied nothing. 'I see it all now,'

he said, and he turned to the window and looked out as he spoke. 'I see now why you came down here; to get away from her. I see why you couldn't pretend to be glad when we came. We can't help hating, I suppose; but it does seem to me, Mother, that we can help being unjust. It does seem to me that you might have put out your hand to her, and all that she was trying to do for us both — when once she had realized that I was suffering.'

She glanced up at him. 'It seems to me, Clive,' she said, her lips moved faintly and the words just issued; 'that it was always I who held out my hand and Hester who did not even see it and walked past it. It seems to me that it is you who are cruelly unjust. What you said a moment ago is the truth. Hester never thought about me at all. She didn't care a jot whether I cared for her or not. All that she cared for was to have you, and to keep you; and while she cared to keep you, I did not exist.'

'It's not true! It's not true!' Clive cried, and he turned to her again and eyed her, fiercely, yet supplicatingly. 'You don't understand a girl of Hester's type. She hasn't your codes and symbols; she doesn't feel or express things as you and I do. You don't dream how shy and sensitive and apprehensive she is, under that firm surface. — She's had

to keep firm, poor darling — because she's always had so much to face. She didn't know how to please you and didn't realize when she was displeasing you. — She was in the dark, always; for I always knew. Nothing was lost on me. You and I saw eye to eye, while she had to walk on in the dark and trust me. — And she has trusted me. She's never once faltered or turned away; till yesterday; when you pushed her too far.'

'Oh; I pushed her too far yesterday? How did Hester put that to you? What form did her arraignment of me take; — and of you? — For Celia informed me that she was angry with you, too.'

'She was angry with me because you garbled my interpretation of her to suit your own purposes. She told me that she'd gone to you, as I asked her to, to beg your pardon, and that you had sneered at her and thrown her contrition in her face. She told me that you hated her and that she could bear it no longer. It was the truth, Mother. Even Celia sees it. Even Celia sees that you hate my wife.'

'Clive,' said Monica, 'I must talk to you now.' It was growing dark. His flashing face was dim to her as he stood there, leaning back, his arms tightly folded across his chest. Monica leaned forward and

pressed her hand against her brows. 'You have said what Hester has told you to say, and now I must speak. I am not going to defend myself. All that is past. Perhaps what you say is true. I may have hated Hester from the beginning. But if I did, I know now that I had reason to hate her.' She dropped her hand and looked across the room at him. 'She is a bad woman,' she said.

He leaned against the window staring at her with no change of countenance. It was only the look of cold attention that met her, as though, in a trench, he awaited the approaching bomb and computed where it was to fall.

'That's a Victorian word.' She remembered the other day and his faint laugh. 'I don't mean it in that way. I mean it because she has deceived you. Hester, when she came to you, had things to hide; things to fear. Before she met you she had a lover.'

There was silence, deep silence for a moment. Then he said: 'I knew that.'

'You knew it? Since when?'

'Since the beginning,' said Clive. 'She told me at the very first; down in Cornwall.' He looked across the room at his mother and it seemed to her now that it was a look of hatred. She had uncovered Hester's past; and his; with all its suffering.

'I see.' She forced her lips to speak, but could not force them to speak without a horrible irony; her astonishment, her panic, were like a tempest shaking her. 'I see. After such confidences, such forgivenesses asked and granted, it was natural that I should feel something very strange in you; as I did; and in her; — when you first brought her. That explains everything, really.'

Clive was silent for a moment, taking full cognizance of her intention. 'No,' he said. 'Not in the sense you mean. To think in the way that you are thinking, where Hester is concerned, would be an impossibility to anyone who loves her. I was not writhing with male jealousy. I was not feeling her damaged goods; — as little as she was herself. That is precisely what you do mean, isn't it?' — Yes. He was looking at her with hatred. She felt it flowing into her as if every vein were an inlet for a deadly poison. — 'If I was strange,' he said, 'it wasn't only because of those sad things in her life and because I knew that you would feel as you do feel, if we were to tell you of them. It was because Hester and I had faced things you never dreamed of; horrible things; I in the war; she in Russia. We weren't ordinary happy young engaged people. I had seen suffering that had nearly turned my

brain, and she had seen cruelty that had seared her. It was because of what we both had to hide from other people that we came to care so much for each other, at the first. We seemed, from the moment we saw each other, to understand. As for her lover, she wanted me to tell you, of course. And I refused. I knew what you would feel,' Clive repeated, and on his sweet, pure lip she saw the echo of her own cruel irony.

'You will admit — she has not so altered all the codes and symbols you inherit from me, obsolete as they are — you will admit that it is a natural feeling.'

'Perfectly natural. Nothing could be more natural; — like all the rest of our primitive emotions. You see yourself as the pure and Hester as the impure woman.'

'Do I?' It seemed to her that Clive had thrown knives at her and that she felt them quivering in her throat and side. — All that suffering that he had hidden from her, his mother, and that Hester had understood at a glance. — 'Perhaps there is a meaning in the words, in spite of Hester's code. Do you subscribe also to the modern doctrine of contemporaneity in love-affairs? Are you a completely complacent husband? If your wife had sad

things in her past, are you willing that she should have pleasant ones in her present?' She was willing, more than willing, to hurt Clive. He had done more than hurt her. She could not live after seeing that cold hatred burn in his eyes.

'What do you mean?' he asked sternly.

Monica rose to her feet. She felt no weariness. The poison of his hatred mounted in her, lending her a horrible strength. 'Do you forgive your wife everything, and your mother nothing? Are you in the plot that brought her lover here to live? Was it acting on your part, too, the other night? Or must I tell you — since they have hoodwinked you — that Captain Ingpen is her lover?'

'What are you saying? You are mad,' said Clive. As she saw his face a ghastly happiness filled her heart. He had been deceived. 'You are mad,' Clive repeated. 'It has become a disease in you, your hatred.'

'Ask her if it is a disease! Monica panted. 'Ask her whose ring he wears! Ask her when they saw Chartres together! Ask her why she cried this afternoon when he was with her and Robin was sent away! — I know it all! I have seen it all! — You unfortunate, you hoodwinked, you miserable child!'

He stood, his face ghastly, staring, incredulous. 'She hates him,' he said.

'Does she? Ask her how she hates him? She has betrayed you.'

He had stumbled forward — the bird with the broken wing — as if with an impulse of escape, and stopped in the middle of the room, staring around him, seeing the way barred. His mother stood before him. 'Hester couldn't lie to me,' he said.

'She has lied to you,' said Monica. 'You see now why she was so anxious to come to live here; so that I should not be lonely any longer.'

The thirsty vengeance of her voice drew his eyes to her and he stood there poised, and looked at her for a long moment. 'I don't believe you,' he then said. 'If it's true that he was her lover, it's not true that he is her lover now. If she has not told me, it's because she was afraid. Yes,' he looked steadfastly at his mother, drawing, it seemed, assurance from her balefulness, 'she's been afraid of you; and of me. She loves me with all her heart and soul; do you understand? As I love her. Every drop of her blood is mine and every drop of mine is hers. Nothing could part us. — She wanted to tell me everything long ago in Cornwall, and I refused to

hear. I only knew that it was in France, long ago, and that he was much older than she was and that he'd broken her heart; I thought he was a Frenchman. We never spoke of it again; not once. — And he has followed her here. He has dared to come to her and torment her while I'm away. — And you have played detective and thought you would rid yourself of her like that. — Good-bye, Mother.'

He did not look at her. He brushed past her to the door and left her standing there with her head thrown back, her eyes dilated. Miriam found her lying on the floor when she brought in the lamp and she and Cook carried her up to her room and laid her on her bed.

CHAPTER XIII

IN the night she woke after long, swooning sleep, clear-minded. She had been dreaming of her mother, who had, in the dream, come laughing to the breakfast-table and said, as she stood behind the coffee-urn: 'I am going to become a Catholic to-day, and you must all come and see me take the veil at Brompton Oratory.' It was a very characteristic announcement. They had always, all of them, been a family for sudden resolutions, and later in the dream she saw her mother, dressed like a bride, before an altar blazing with candles, and she herself and Alison, her younger sister, were bridesmaids and smiled at each other over the shower bouquets of the period. Then they were both crying and everything was dark and they were standing on either side of a black catafalque and their mother lay beneath; dead: 'Of course we all knew that she killed herself,' said Alison. Not until this dream had the truth been spoken — that her mother had indeed taken the overdose purposely; but she knew now that she had always known it. The dreadful grief drifted above her like a pall of smoke and when she woke she lay beneath it, thinking of all those

she had loved, who were dead. — Her father, her mother, Charlie, her brothers Christopher and Martin, and the young sister Alison who had died in girlhood, nearly breaking her mother's heart — though that had not finally broken until her father went. And it was strange to think of them all ending so sadly when they had been such a happy family. And all were dead: for ever and ever and ever. She felt herself repeating the words 'For ever.' Such strange words. In form they seemed to possess something; but it was only the dust of oblivion. They were all gone; irretrievably submerged in the salt, dissolving ocean of time, and even the few sparkling memories that lingered on in the minds of the living would soon be extinguished.

Now, detached, emotionless, yet stricken to the heart as if by a deadly drug, she lay and saw a vast cliff rising as far as the eye could reach; as vast and dark and towering as a tidal wave, reared eternally against an abyss of empty space. And it plunged beneath further than thought could fathom into a sea of death. The cliff was the world, and line upon line, like the minutely fretted ledges of a coral reef, the human generations emerged, just above the last sea-level, like a desperate striving crepitation

of insects. The cliff was immutable. The sea, but for its imperceptible upward movement, motionless; only the line of life pulsed with a fierce, miniature rhythm as the insects struggled up, always up, always away from the engulfing sea, and fought with each other, and tore each other down, and mounted upon each other in their effort to escape and rise above the creeping tide; all with a hallucinated ardour of faith, their little eyes fixed on the cliff that all sought unavailingly to scale. Then silence; stillness. The tide of death had mounted and they sank, generation after generation, line after line; and the ledge of stilled consciousness that lay just below the surface was as distant in reality, as inaccessible and perished, as the ledges on which the Pharaohs slept, or ape-like men lay curled in profundities of oblivion. 'Yes; that's life,' Monica heard herself say in the darkness.

When Miriam brought her her early tea, she told her that she would spend the morning in bed and see no one. 'No one, Miriam, not even Mr. Wilmott. I'm too tired after that horrid fall last night.' She knew that Clive would not come. It was Hester she feared. A terror had waked in her with her later waking and the ledge of life to which she still clung was real to her again and the cliff and

the sea half forgotten, a terror that Hester might come and summon her forth to retribution. She saw herself now as the creeping thing that Clive saw, the thing he would have shown to Hester last night. She had not thought explicitly of the revelation that had been conveyed to her with Clive's words; but during the hours of stunned sleep all her awareness of Hester had shifted and on waking to the direful daylight she knew that she had traduced her and had never seen her truly. The fiercely believed myth of her present infidelity revealed itself for what it was; the shadow cast by her own hatred. Not only Ingpen's face was there to dispel it — with those tears — but Hester's also; the face of the repudiating Madonna. Such a woman, who had from the first avowed all her past to the man she loved, would not lie and creep clandestinely. She had loved Ingpen and put him out of her life; and if she had seen him yesterday it was because he had sought her out; or because she had summoned him to tell him that he must go. Yes; that must be the truth. But she would not have seen it unless Clive's words had unsealed her eyes. 'You know nothing about Clive and me: you never have,' came back to her. It was the truth. Their lives had, from the first, been founded on sorrows, acceptances, under-

standings from which she had been shut out. She had no place in it. She had no place in any life. She had become a mere parasite, a crawling, stinging parasite; something too vile for contemplation. So it was that he had shown her to Hester. Never, never, in her shame, let her see Hester again.

After lunch she got up and dressed carefully. The day was bright. It was still warm enough for her grey coat and skirt. She tied the knot of *crêpe-de-chine* beneath her throat, pressed her pretty hat to its becoming level above her eyebrows, drew on her soft grey gloves and slipped her wrist-watch into place. Miriam had put a bunch of verbenas, all bright, delicate colours, like an old sprigged muslin, on her dressing-table, and she selected three, — deep pink, pale pink and purple, and pinned them into the lapel of her coat. Brightly, if with a specious brightness, her eyes looked back at her in the mirror, and, with the eddy of gold against her cheek, she was the most serene and youthful of ageing ladies. She tipped a drop of lavender water on her handkerchief before she went and tucked it in her sleeve.

Miriam met her at the foot of the stairs selecting a stick from the stand. 'Oh, Ma'am, you are too tired to go out,' said Miriam, who, trim and crisp,

was a parlour-maid to match such a lady. 'That was a bad turn you had last night, and Cook and me think you had better stay in bed and have the doctor.'

'But see how well I look, Miriam,' said Monica, smiling. 'I think I must have been a little bilious and air and exercise are the best things for me. I shall be in for tea. If Miss Bowen should come with her violin tell her to go over her music until I get back. — And, oh, Miriam' — no explicit stratagem was in her mind; only a deep instinct led her — 'I will put on my old georgette tea-gown tonight; the sleeve is a little ripped, so please have a look at it.'

There was no stratagem: but if anything unforeseen should happen to her, Miriam would be able to say that when last seen she had been quite herself. Nothing, she felt as she walked swiftly away, could seem more natural, more securely fastened to the ledge. Miriam, afterwards, would even remember the verbenas.

What, she thought, walking so rapidly down the station-road that the blood mounted hotly to her weary cheek and she had to pause more than once and draw breath — what if she took the 3.50 to London? She could go to a hotel, telegraph to

Miriam for her clothes, and then on to France or Italy or Africa, anywhere where she might hide. But as she approached the station she knew that London was not her intention, nor foreign travel. She turned aside into the woods that ran beside the line and walked out into the country beyond and along deep lanes and up over a common thick with gorse bushes where she stripped a cluster of flowers into her palm in passing by. She had always picked gorse on this common, ever since she had come to Oddley, held it until it was warm and sniffed at the thick soft fragrance. To-day she picked and held, but forgot to smell it. She lifted her wrist presently and saw that it was 3.35. It was time to turn. So she crossed the fields and climbed a gate and came again to the railway woods, went through them, creeping under the wire and up the steep embankment, and stood for a moment looking up and down the line. But, she remembered, walking on, if she stood here she herself would be seen from a distance by the engine-driver. A little further on the line curved above the woods and she would be invisible until the train was almost upon her. There was plenty of time; and raising her wrist again to look at her watch, she walked quickly along the cinder path beside the sleepers and saw, as she

approached the curve, a little gate, forgotten till then, that, below her, opened from the copse to a right of way across the line. All was fitted to her need. She would stand here, just above it, as if she had just ascended from the gate and was waiting for the train to pass before she crossed.

'I can stand here to watch it pass,' she thought, 'and then go home, and no one will ever know. And it will become to me only a desperate dream. People have so often stood and watched trains go by and had these thoughts. They mean nothing, really.' And she remembered that it was always pleasant to see the tray of early-morning-tea brought into one's room. She could go home because of early-morning-tea. And now in the distance she heard the low humming of the approaching train, growing in the air, and remembered Anna Karénine and how she had read the book to Clive one summer before the war. She had cried in reading of Anna's death and Clive had put his head down on her shoulder and held her.

The face of the train appeared suddenly above the copses. It was like the face of a bee, so blank and so intent, and the sinuous following body lurched, fore-shortened, smoothly round the curve. If she stood quietly to watch it pass, no one could

find anything to note in her attitude (she was aware of no explicit change in her thought, but the memory of Clive had reminded her that something intolerable hemmed her in closely, from which she must escape); — and if, just as it approached her, humming and throbbing, she stepped quietly before it, or better still — her mind flashed pictures now — stumbled and fell forward, Miriam could tell how she had fallen last night. Her sight felt empty; her heart had melted away; she was thinking of her mother and of the dream: 'Of course we all knew she killed herself.' It was as if her mother, above the swift, hungry humming, were calling to her, and she felt no fear, only laid her stick down quickly beside her — for it would be horrid to be entangled and impeded — and the insect whir of wheels and pistons was close now, close ——.

What was this crash and impact? — Death? She was dragged aside and struggled for footing on the steep embankment. Great eyes were looking into hers; — eyes of passionate reprobation; eyes of the Byzantine Madonna, and the clutch on her arm and shoulder of hard hands. 'That would be a rotten thing to do,' said Hester, and her voice floated like a wisp borne on the roar and current of the train sweeping by above them.

Hester had no need to drag her. She went passively; weak as a rag; like a criminal with gyves upon his wrists. Once it was known, one could never do it. She might almost be put into a lunatic asylum. It would not be possible to pretend to Hester. She remembered her stick lying beside the line on the permanent way. Hester had seen her lay it down. She had been watching her for how long? She remembered that she consulted her watch again and again. No; there was no use pretending. So she walked on, held by Hester, into the little copse which, thickly planted with pine trees, made a whispering sound above their heads. Here Hester paused, and as Monica felt herself released she sank down upon the ground and covered her face with her hands.

Hester remained standing beside her, leaning against a tree. 'It would be a rotten thing to do, wouldn't it?' she repeated, and a long time must have passed. 'What would have become of Clive if you had? He would never have forgiven himself.'

Monica stilled her shuddering breaths. She forced her mind, from some vast dispersal, into the channel of thought. It was like air entering drowned lungs, cutting its way resuscitatingly. 'It might

have been an accident,' was what she heard herself say.

'Well, he would have known it couldn't have been an accident, after your scene last night. It would have been the most awful kind of vengeance, really,' said Hester. 'But we won't talk about it. Rest, and try not to think.'

But Monica muttered: 'No; no; — I didn't mean that. Try to believe that I didn't mean that. It was only that when I saw he hated me I couldn't go on.'

Hester was silent for a little while, and in the silence, over the whispering of the pine-trees, Monica heard, far away, the deep breaths of the engine as the 3.50 pulled out after its stop at Oddley Station.

'You know, I think you are rather foolish,' Hester then remarked, bitterly, but with a strange, impersonal bitterness. 'You ought to know Clive better than that. People can say anything, when they've had a knock-down blow, can't they? Clive had been knocked flat. You understand that, I'm sure. He doesn't hate you. You couldn't make him hate you — whatever you did. It's much more me he'd be likely to hate.'

Monica put down her hands and raised her head

and looked up at her daughter-in-law. Hester still stood leaning back against the pine-tree, her elbow in her hand, her chin on her knuckles, looking before her with a cold, intent look. Her lips were drawn; her cheek sunken; but how pale and starry was her forehead. Monica fixed her eyes on Hester's forehead. She had always granted that Hester's forehead was beautiful, and the shape of her dark, proud head. She looked at her, carefully, for a long time. And Hester, unaware of her scrutiny, remained sunken in her own dark thoughts.

'Hester, how did you know that I was here?' Something so new had come into Monica's apprehension that she was filled with dispassionate wonder. 'What made you come?' she asked.

'Robin saw you,' said Hester. She kept her eyes fixed before her and spoke with a change of tone, with relief, perhaps, at the adjournment of their personal question. 'He was on the hill and saw you starting and came and told me that you were going out. He looked so queer that I asked him if anything were the matter and he said: 'Grannie's unhappy. She can't walk properly. She keeps stopping all the time.' — Of course he was badly upset yesterday — by me and Godfrey,' said Hester, uttering the name steadily, though after a slight

pause. 'Clive saw how upset he was, when he came back last night, from you, and found him sitting alone in the garden. That's another reason, you see. — For hatred, I mean. — A good reason, don't you think? Mothers oughtn't to have pasts that let their children in for such experiences, ought they? — their nervous children.' And now Hester glanced down at her with a smile of cutting self-mockery. 'So I ran up the hill,' she went on, after the comment, which Monica received with a deepening absorption, 'and I could still see you, on the station road, walking very fast and, as he'd said, stopping now and then. It didn't need a nervous little boy to see that something was wrong. So I told him to stay in the nursery and that I'd find you and cheer you up, and I ran down by the lane and through the woods and I've been dogging you ever since. When I saw you walking over the common and picking gorse, I thought that perhaps you didn't mean anything. But when you came back into the copse and crept under the wires and looked up and down the line — and at your watch — I knew; of course. So I followed you, keeping well out of sight, till you stopped above the gate — I saw how you were thinking it all out — and you didn't hear me when I got up close behind you; the train

was coming and you were listening too hard for that. I stood there, just below you, as if we were waiting for the train together. I don't think they suspected anything; — though they must have thought it odd — about your stick, and my dragging you back so suddenly. — But I don't think they suspected anything, really.'

Monica's marvelling gaze remained fixed upon her face. 'I suppose,' she said, after a pause, 'that it was for Clive's sake you did it.'

'I don't know about that,' said Hester, also after a pause and again glancing at her. 'I didn't want you to commit suicide.' And again with the bitter flicker of a smile she added: 'And I can understand wanting to get under a train just as well as you can, Monica.'

Now a long silence fell. A golden sunset had slowly embued the sky and through the openings of the wood it slanted over the pine-needles to Monica's feet and fell warmly on her face and hands. It was like a peaceful tide stealing in upon them, and she was content to sit there and feel it take her, hearing suddenly that the air was full of soft, autumnal insect murmurs, rising and falling joyously, while the brooding fields were like a mother's breast. She closed her eyes. It seemed to her that

she slept, listening in her sleep to the joyous murmur. She could rest safely, for Hester was there beside her and would watch over her.

'Hester,' she said suddenly, still with closed eyes, — 'Hester, what did you mean by saying that Clive might hate you? You must know that it was because of you that he hated me; after what I'd believed of you.'

'Don't you believe it any longer?' Hester enquired after a moment. She had got out her cigarettes and was smoking; looking up at her, Monica saw her through a waft of smoke.

'No; I believe it no longer.'

'Because Clive told you I'd been straight with him in the past?'

'Not only that. That didn't touch the present, did it? No; it all dropped away. — Because of what I felt of you and of Captain Ingpen. I saw, when I woke this morning, that it could not be true, of either of you.'

Hester smoked, her eyes on the sunlit fields. She wore her straight blue linen dress, with the narrow black belt around her hips; rather like a French child's apron. She was bareheaded and looked like a child. 'All the same,' she said presently, 'I see why you believed it. You don't know anything

about me, really, do you? and when you found out that Godfrey and I had been lovers, all the rest must have seemed inevitable. I understood, even last night, when Clive came back, what had happened. — All the same, I do rather wonder at you; — not so much because of me and Godfrey — whom you don't know; — but because of Clive. — How you could think, I mean, that Clive's wife would deceive him. But then you have never understood what I feel about Clive; how I care for him, I mean.'

'Do you mind telling me? — What you feel about him? I always knew you loved him,' said Monica, after the long pause that followed Hester's words; 'but even loving wives do sometimes deceive their husbands.'

Hester knocked off the end of her cigarette and held it away and looked at it, frowning. 'I'd like to try,' she said. 'I'd like to try to explain. It would be a pity not to get it clear, wouldn't it, while we are like this. — What I mean is that I feel you would understand anything I told you.'

'I am sure I should, Hester. Anything you told me.'

'About Clive, then. He was so different from all the men I'd known. He made the rest of them seem

so — grubby — somehow. — One can't say why one falls in love, can one?' said Hester, 'but perhaps difference is one of the chief reasons. I suppose Clive was almost the only gentleman I'd ever really known — except Godfrey; — and he isn't quite so much of one, is he? — It wasn't only that, of course; that would seem so very trivial, wouldn't it? — though I don't think now that it's as trivial as I once did. — The things you jibe at when you're outside seem so different when you're inside. — My father, poor old fellow, isn't quite a gentleman, to begin with; — rather a saint, but not quite a gentleman. Clive is rather a saint, and a gentleman as well. I was like a dull blade when he met me. He's sharpened and sharpened me; — by his difference; by his belief in me; by having to live up to what he takes for granted. — It has hurt frightfully, sometimes, to see what he took for granted and how far from it one was; but by the time one had had a few turns on the wheel one was a good deal sharper. — Of course that's a clumsy metaphor. — He makes one open like a flower; a tight, hard, distrustful flower. — That's more like it. Godfrey never did that. He trampled one under foot.'

'Oh, Hester; — not under foot? Was he cruel?

Must I believe it of him? Did you know I liked him? It hurts me to have you say that.'

'Yes. I saw you liked him. So do I,' said Hester, glancing at her. 'No, he was never cruel. Never. He was kind, always. But kindness can trample, too, you know, if it's blind. I only mean that he tore me to pieces without meaning to, because he was blind. It was because of him that my father cast me off, you know. It would be utterly unfair to blame Godfrey for that. I had all my theories, and if it hadn't been him it would probably have been someone else. But my father came over to Paris and found me living there, in sin, as he called it, and cast me off. He is of that type and generation. And although Godfrey was very sorry about it, and wanted to make up in every way he could, he is of the type and generation that would never dream of marrying their mistress. He wasn't free; and I never thought about marriage; and I'm not blaming him. All the same,' said Hester, holding off her cigarette and surveying it, the bitter savour on her lip, 'I don't think I ever quite forgave him — among all the other things I didn't forgive — when I realized that he looked upon me as a mistress. I've never told anyone about this; not even Clive. I am telling you because it makes you understand what I feel

about Clive. He could never have made such mistakes about me, even if he'd been my lover, and not married to me. We love the people who don't make mistakes about us, don't we?'

'Yes,' said Monica. What mistakes had she not made about Hester?

'I think we'd better be going back now.' Hester tossed away her cigarette. 'You can walk, leaning on my arm, can't you? Robin will be wondering, poor lamb, and I must get back to him; — and you must go to bed at once and have some hot milk with brandy in it and then get a good long sleep. — Pretty rotten for you, too, it's been; — and don't think I don't see it!' And Hester smiled at her as she held out her hand to assist her to rise. 'Lean on me,' she said.

They went slowly along the little grass track that, at the edge of the field, ran beside the copse. The sun had set and a soft evening breeze fanned their cheeks, but the golden light still enveloped them — the light in which everything could be said, and thinking of Hester's smile just now, as she held out her hand, a smile so sweet and childlike that it brought again the sense of bewilderment and marvel, Monica asked:

'Why did you think Clive might hate you,

Hester? You haven't told me that. It seems to me that where there is such love as that between you and Clive it is secure against all such danger.'

Hester, sustaining her arm, walked beside her, illumined in her blue against the pine-trees, and glancing at her, as she kept silence, Monica saw that it was with an effort that she now kept back her tears. 'Tell me, Hester,' she said.

'Can't you see?' said Hester, holding her head high and keeping her eyes fixed before her. 'It's partly you and partly Godfrey. He couldn't stand finding out like that. You will say that I ought to have told him at once when I found that Godfrey was living here. Perhaps I should have. Only I'm accustomed, in a way, to protecting Clive. He goes under so horribly, you know; while I'm as strong as a horse. And I couldn't bear to make him so miserable; to bring it all up, after we'd said nothing for all these years. He begged me to say nothing more, when I told him, down in Cornwall. He didn't want to hear the name of the man who had made me so unhappy; — though I did tell him that it was in Paris, just after I'd left Girton; but he said we'd forget it and that the only difference it made was that I was the dearer to him because of what I'd suffered. But I don't think he ever really did forget

it, poor darling,' said Hester, smiling the bitter smile over her unshed tears. 'I think it haunted him and tore at him, frightfully, and that the more we were to each other the more he minded. His loveliness unshackled him in so many directions, but somehow it didn't unshackle him in that. — I mean, he felt about it, really, just as his father would have felt — if you'd had to tell him such a thing. And that was why, when I saw Godfrey again on Saturday night, I was so dreadfully upset. I knew how Clive would feel. That's why I behaved so devilishly. I was so upset that I had to set my teeth in something; and it seemed to me that Godfrey was sneering at me and taunting me. But he was upset, too. We had parted with the most grisly quarrel — out there — at Chartres, you see; — that's why I hate Chartres, Monica; do you remember? — and never to run into each other again, or hear of each other, and then find ourselves face to face between a husband who hadn't forgotten and a mother-in-law who didn't like you! — Well, you can see for yourself that it needed strong nerves. Godfrey was clever that night, wasn't he? He played up well. I never dreamed you would find out, or guess, and thought I could manage it all and get him to go away and no one the wiser. I thought, for a day or two, that he'd

go of himself, and when I found he didn't I wrote and asked him to come and he told me — yesterday when he was with me, you know — how it had happened and the horrible ill-luck about the ring and your seeing the initials. — I saw that ring, while we played bridge that night. I gave it to him in Paris; we found it together in an old shop and I never dreamed he would have gone on wearing it. — He gave me one too; a beautiful ring; but I went out in Paris, after parting from him, and threw it into the Seine. What a little fool I was! But I couldn't wear it myself and I couldn't bear to think of anybody else wearing it. — Well — I seemed to see nothing while we played and while I made those imbecile mistakes — except that ring of mine on his finger. — He is going off first thing to-morrow morning, Monica. He said at once that he would go. "Give me one day to pack and settle accounts," he said, "and none of you will ever see me again." He left me, of course, before Clive got back. He never made muddles about things like that. — But it was too late, in a way. I mean, Clive found me crying. Can you understand that?' Hester's arm was steady under her mother-in-law's hand, but Monica now saw that a slow flush had crept up to her cheek. 'I feel as if you would. I feel as if you would under-

stand that one might not get over the man one first loves, even if one loves someone else so much better. He tore me to pieces and made me sick with rage and shame, but I did love him most awfully, and when I saw him again, yesterday, I knew that I still did — can you understand? — And when Clive came in and found me crying, I couldn't deny it. Why should one change because one is parted? But Clive couldn't understand. He said he'd half killed you for my sake, because he trusted me, and that he could never forgive himself and that you had every reason to believe what you did — since half of it was true; — and I was in a rage then and said that all of it would be true, unless he were careful. — We said terrible things to each other; — for the first time.' Hester spoke brokenly, with short, hot sentences. 'And though we were horribly sorry afterwards and said we didn't mean it, it's all there still, in our minds. — For even then — even afterwards — I couldn't tell him that I didn't still love Godfrey, too.'

They had reached Oddley Green now. Sad old Mr. Fellows passed them, taking off his hat with a gentle, mournful glance. Hester's bare head and hot cheeks must strike him as singular. Standing at her cottage gate, a little further on, was Rosemary

Dixon and Monica felt that Hester's eye fixed itself upon these neighbours with a look of desperation. 'We will cut across the Green here,' she said. 'Rosemary won't follow us. We don't want to listen to her latest impressions of Mademoiselle de Lespinasse, do we?'

'No; we don't,' said Hester, with a broken laugh, and Monica now felt that it was she who watched over Hester.

They crossed the Green and reached safety at the gate. The fountain was playing and Hester was looking at it remembering, perhaps, the afternoon of its release: 'When will you come and see Clive?' she asked.

'Will he want to see me?' Monica questioned. She could watch over Hester for these last steps, but she knew that she had no strength left in her and she laid her hand on the gate-post as she spoke.

'Of course he'll want to see you. More than anything,' said Hester. 'But you are neither of you fit for it to-day. Clive is in bed with a temperature. To-morrow will be better and I'll tell him that I've had a talk with you and that you understand everything and that he mustn't brood any more on what happened between you yesterday. — That will be right, won't it?'

'That will be right, Hester.' Monica's eyes were fixed on her daughter-in-law's face.

'Well, good-bye, then,' said Hester. 'You'll come to-morrow, after that sleep, you know.' She was turning away when Monica put out her hand and detained her. 'Wait. — I want to say something first. — I want to ask you something. — Do you forgive me, Hester?' she said.

Hester stared. 'For what?'

'For misjudging you. For traducing you — to your husband.'

'Well, if you call it traducing when, as Clive said, half of it was true.'

'Not the half I minded most; not the half he would have minded most.'

'Well; no; I see.' Hester gazed at her with a new attention. 'But of course the other half, the old half; — having a lover, living with someone you're not married to; — I suppose you really hate all that sort of thing as much as my father did.'

'Not as he did. Certainly not as he did. I am not thinking of that. I can't judge that. That's over. It has nothing to do with me. I did traduce you.'

'Well, that's over, too; forgotten and forgiven,' said Hester with her smile, strangely compounded now of bitterness and benignancy. 'You must for-

give *me*, if it comes to that, for being so unutterably the wrong person.'

'The wrong person?'

'Yes. As you always found me. Wrong for you; wrong for Clive. — He has made me feel it now. — Yes,' Hester turned her head away and the smile still held her lip but Monica saw her tears; 'I have ruined both of your lives; — or almost. — He ought to have married Celia, of course; as you wanted him to. — Don't you suppose I see that now? — Good-bye.' And Hester walked rapidly away over the Green.

CHAPTER XIV

IT was almost dinner-time. Miriam received her back calmly and told her that no one had called. 'But you've been too far, Ma'am,' she observed, and Monica agreed to go to bed again and have hot milk and brandy. Already she was in a half dream when Miriam brought it and very soon, after drinking it, she fell asleep, her mind empty of every image.

When she woke it was late. Her room was dark and all was still. She lighted her candle and saw that her clock stood at half-past ten. The maids had gone to bed. Across the green, on its hill side, Clive and Hester, up at The Crofts, were, she hoped, sleeping peacefully. Hester would never tell Clive the truth about the afternoon; that would be to grieve him too terribly; but she would have told him that his mother could never again hurt him as she had done. All would be well with the young lives. And, suddenly, in the apathy of release, of reconstruction, a memory, an image, shot into her mind. She saw Ingpen's head, dark against the sky, looking in at her through the window.

With the memory, a dreadful distress filled her; a

new, a strange distress. The globe had turned again; the daylight world of youth where Clive and Hester lived and struggled, moved slowly round to darkness. She was again in the sorrowful world of the Old Manor Farm and remembered the scarred heart of her friend. He was going early to-morrow morning. He had promised Hester that they should never see him again, and he would keep his promise.

Monica rose and put her feet to the ground. She felt feeble yet restored. It could not be. 'No, it can't be,' she said aloud, her own childlike voice startling her as she heard it. She dressed quickly, as she had dressed that afternoon; carefully — but that she did not pause for flowers and lavender-water and forgot her gloves. She crept downstairs. The house was still. An old dark cloak hung in the hall cupboard and she wrapped it round her. The night was cloudy, moonless, the way solitary; but even if she were seen she would not be recognized. And even if she were recognized; — she felt herself smile slightly at her own indifference. All the scruples and inhibitions of the daylight world had fallen from her.

Not by the wood, she thought, as she stole out, down the path, through the gate; it was shorter by the wood but in the dark she would not find her

way across the planks and she must run no danger of not reaching her friend. The road lay, the colour of the sky, between the darker hedges, and it seemed to unroll itself before her and to lead her on into the obscurity, and it was restful to walk like this, swiftly, unhesitatingly, in the darkness, as if led on. She could not remember that she had ever walked, late at night, in the country, alone, before. It was an adventure, and as she had smiled slightly on thinking of doffed scruples, so she smiled now, contrasting the adventures of her life with those of Ingpen's life; adventures to which his personal involvements had, perhaps, been only a background; and again vaguely remembered names and images moved before her mind as she went along the drowsy English road: — dark, menacing faces; fertile valleys, unknown perhaps, to European eyes till his had seen them; and she saw pallid stretches of plain, bleached by the sun; and rocks with inky shadows rising against a torrid sky; and peril everywhere. How far away; how remote, how unreal to her; yet upon such images the web of his consciousness was stretched.

Now the Manor Farm woods stole gently towards her, so tame, so diminished by the darkness that they made her think of a tabby-cat reconnoi-

tring along the roadside, and there, beyond them, was the oblong bulk of the Manor Farm just visible, with chinks of light along its lower windows and a dim orange fan of light laid above its door. He was still up; of course; he was leaving early to-morrow and would have much to do; but it struck her, as she opened the gate so softly, that with all her intrepidity she would have been disconcerted had the house been unlighted. Softly she opened the gate and softly stole across the lawn, her hands outstretched till they touched the window-sill. Then she stood still for a moment and, for that one moment, a dart of wonder at herself went through her, almost as if she woke from a somnambulist dream to find herself strangely astray. But no, this was herself; she had meant to come and her friend would not misunderstand her.

She lifted her hand and tapped softly three times. There was no sound, no movement. The chink of light close there before her remained unaltered. She tapped again, three times, lightly, insistently. Then a heavy muffled sound answered her, a sound of incredulous haste, a thrust-back chair, a table toppling, tottering. — The curtains were flung aside, he was there, before her, against the lighted room. Her face looked in at him through the pane, and for one

moment they gazed at each other as they had gazed the other day. But now the story was to take life and substance. They were to remain ghosts no longer. He threw open the sash.

'I have come to say good-bye,' said Monica.

His collar was unfastened; his tie loosened; and oddly, automatically, his fingers went up to them, angrily wrenching them into place. 'May I come in?' she faintly smiled. How absurd, with all its beauty, life was! That at a moment like this she should feel herself wish to say: 'Let it alone: it makes no difference.' And the sense of pathos brought by the untoward little mischance deepened in her as, while she waited on the doorstep, she realized that he had said not a word of welcome or surprise.

The door opened and she went before him into the drawing-room. A chair at the table had been pushed back in haste and a heavy pile of documents lay sprawling on the floor beside a battered leather box with brass corners. She glanced down at it as she went in; it seemed to have been in a dream that she had seen it before; it had come from so far away; it was going so far away again. Those strange names and visions floated for a moment through her mind. 'Hindu Kush,' she thought

as she moved into the middle of the room and looked about her for the second and the last time. The bright landscapes still hung on the wall; on the mantelpiece stood the uncouth stone animals, like those on Hester's mantelpiece. The clock still ticked with security; yet all wore a dismantled air, and the old square leather box, yawning there on the floor, expressed its owner as the room had never done. He was on the march again; — no, not on the march; that was too disciplined a simile: — on the prowl. The wilderness was again to receive him.

He pulled a chair for her before the fire and she sank down in it and leant back her head, closing her eyes. Absurd, beautiful; yes; but she knew that as she thought of all it meant of loss her heart was almost breaking.

'Hester told me you are going early in the morning, so I felt I had to see you. — I hope I have not seemed too horrible to you,' she said, keeping her eyes closed.

He stood across the room by the table. 'Horrible? No. Why?' She heard that he stooped and began gathering up the fallen papers. He gathered them up in crackling layers and dumped them down on the table.

'I have seemed horrible to myself,' said Monica.

'But I had to think of my son. I misjudged you and Hester. I thought he was betrayed.'

Ingpen went on dumping down the papers and for a moment made no reply. 'I saw what you must think,' he said then. 'No; — you didn't misjudge me — though in the present instance your judgment went astray. What you thought me capable of is exactly what I am capable of; — had you not been involved; and had I still wanted Hester.' He sat down on the chair beside the table and his hands still moved among the papers. 'That's quite all right,' he said. 'But I don't understand; — how this is possible, I mean — how you can be to me like this. I saw you knew everything, yesterday; — no, the day before was it? I told Hester you knew everything. And that everything was over.'

She had opened her eyes while he spoke; he was not looking at her; his head was on his hand and he rubbed his hand over his brow and across his eyes, repeating: 'I can't quite understand.'

'It's because of Hester, I think.' Monica had not known till now that but for Hester it would not have been possible. 'I had a long talk with Hester this afternoon. She found me when I was very desperate. I thought I had killed my son's love for me. And she was extraordinarily kind.

Everything is changed. And, after I had slept, when I woke just now and remembered you, I knew that I must see you.'

He had dropped his hand and was looking over at her, his dark brows brooding, still in perplexity, above his hot pale eyes; and, looking her assurance at him, she went on: 'We were meant to meet like this, with nothing before us, and everything between us. We have nothing to hide now. We know each other for ever.'

He said nothing, but presently he got up and walked to and fro, his hands behind him. 'Are you friends with Hester?' he asked at length.

'Friends? I don't know. But I understand why you and Clive loved her.'

'I am glad of that,' said Ingpen. He continued to walk to and fro. 'Then I can tell you everything. I would like to give you the history of everything, if that's what you mean I may do. You are being so beautiful to me; — but I don't want to take advantage — and force things on you. Only I would like to do Hester one good turn, for all the ill ones.'

'I want to hear everything that you care to tell me.'

'I met her in Paris,' said Ingpen, 'at the end of the

war, and I had never seen anything like her. I had lived so much out of England and I hadn't followed the changes that were taking place among the young, and all the women I had known could be put into simple categories: —the chaste and the unchaste: the attainable and the unattainable; — and I hadn't much faith in the latter unless they happened to be in love with somebody else. I had never conceived of a woman — a young woman — unprotected, without position or fortune or worldly asset of any kind, who could at once set the very highest value on herself and yet unhesitatingly give herself away. I had never conceived of a woman in love who had not a trace of the siren about her — and not a trace of the virtuous victim who bargains with her virtue for permanence and fidelity. Hester never allured and never bargained. She came to me because she loved me and thought no less well of herself for giving than of me for taking. The old hallmarks did not exist for her. I was a married man. — Did you know that I'd been married? — That's a story that I won't inflict on you. She's dead, poor creature, and we pretty well hated each other before the end, though we began with a Tristram and Isolde romance. — I was perfectly frank with Hester and she took what I had to offer

with her eyes open, with perfect courage and perfect integrity. At the same time I don't think she quite realized what kind of man I was. I didn't mean to deceive her; but she was deceived. She was very young and very ignorant and took her first love affair with a terrible whole-heartedness. I didn't believe in whole hearts where love affairs were concerned and she never understood that. She was very ingenuous. She still is. And she is faithful to the core.' Ingpen looked at Monica from the end of the room which he had, in his pacing, reached.

'And, since she was faithful, why did you part? Were you faithless?' Monica asked.

'Yes; I was faithless, after a fashion,' said Ingpen, still standing to look at her; seeking, not arranging, the truth. 'But I don't think that I am by nature disloyal, if you can accept the difference. And I can even conceive that I might have remained faithful to one woman in spite of my polygamous tendencies; because I can love very deeply. It's only that things get broken. They break more easily in love affairs than in marriages, perhaps. A quarrel isn't as perilous a thing in a marriage as it is in a love affair. There's nothing to keep people together in a love affair — except love; and that may seem extinguished. — Well. Yes. I was faithless,' he re-

sumed his pacing, 'from her point of view. She is a modern girl; but only in the way of freedom; not of licence, and she felt contemporaneity in love affairs an unforgivable affront and injury. All the same I should have kept straight, for I loved her very deeply, if another woman hadn't turned up, a woman I had loved in India, years before. It was only a month after Hester gave me this ring.' He glanced over at her with a twist of his grim smile. — 'Poor old Aunt Harriet! To what uses I tried to put her! When I saw your face that morning I felt sure you had seen the initials; but you spoke of great-grandmothers and that gave me the clue and I forgot about the date. — Well, the other woman came to Paris with her husband, for the Peace Conference. I was there, too, and Hester was secretary to another bigwig; — that was how we met. It was a shock to see the other woman again. I am very susceptible, you know, and she was still quite extraordinarily lovely; not happy with her husband and her boy killed in the war. She had never relinquished her sense of a special claim on me because I was her only affair, and she made the most of her griefs and memories. But it was my fault. I was faithless, and Hester found it out. She already suspected that something was amiss when, by some mischance, they met

at a function, my friend a very brilliant personage and Hester a little outsider. They found they both knew me — and knew me well, and my friend was exquisitely rude; so rude that she gave herself away. Hester confronted me with my infidelity and I didn't lie to her. I couldn't lie to Hester. We had gone down to Chartres for the week-end and we had a terrible scene there and she left me and I never heard of her again until the other night. By Heaven, you know — I was pretty well knocked out when I saw her appear there in the door between you and your son!'

Poor little Hester! So young! She flitted across Monica's memory, a sombre slender figure in the black cloak lined with red, suspicious of all softness; the obscure girl who had endured exquisite rudeness at the hands of a brilliant rival. How clearly she could retrace the flaming of that passionate young heart. She sat and thought in silence, looking into the fire, while Ingpen, restlessly, walked up and down, and at last she questioned him again: 'You must have known that it might come out at any moment, when you saw her here, married, happy, safe, with her husband and her child. Why didn't you go at once? You knew we were the type of people who couldn't accept it. How do you forgive

yourself for not going? Didn't you feel it was to use her cruelly?'

Ingpen stopped in his walk and looked over at her. 'I wanted to stay near you,' he said.

Monica pondered, not lifting her eyes from the fire. 'Near her too, don't you think, perhaps?'

'No. I still wear her ring. I always shall. Because of something she meant to me that no one else will ever mean: something of youth and faith. But I was horribly sorry to find her here. All I wanted of her was to ask if we couldn't be friends; if she couldn't accept my going on among you all. Judged by her old standards she would have felt it absurd that I should have to clear out now just because she and I had once been lovers; absurd, antiquated, irrational. And you know, in a way, I feel it that myself. — No: I am going: I see I must go. I see you all push me out. But the odd thing is that you — the older generation — could bear it, could live over it and keep me here. — Isn't it so?' — He confronted her and then went on, not waiting for an answer, his voice recovering its heavy calm; 'But when I saw her yesterday I saw how she had changed. You have changed her; he has changed her. She has grown into all the standards she once rejected so fiercely.

She is a wife, with the standards of a wife. She couldn't tolerate the thought of hiding my identity from her husband if I stayed, and he couldn't tolerate seeing his wife's former lover. — Does he know now who I am?' Again Ingpen confronted her. 'Is that why you thought you had killed his love for you?' And he waited now for her reply.

'Yes,' said Monica, 'that was why.'

'I see. Yes, I see.' Ingpen gazed at her, his hands clasped behind him. 'And he hates me like slow poison. — And will you understand if I say that I felt a stir of hate for him the other evening when I saw him there; her possessor. What are we made of do you think? I don't want her in the least. What I want is to stay. Near you.'

She was wondering, as she looked at him, whether she must conceal from him how deeply he moved her; wondering whether, at a glance, a gesture, the thread of flame might creep between them; knowing that she could trust him only if she could trust herself. 'Spoiled.' The word came back to her. 'Horribly spoiled.' It must not be. This was perfection that she held within her hand. She owed it to him, to herself, to life, not to jeopardise it by a faltering or a tear. 'We could not have made anything of it, you know,' she said, and her voice was as steady as

her gaze. 'It became impossible — from the moment that she saw you again.'

He looked at her, hard, for a moment longer and then he turned away. He went to the window, pushed aside the curtain and looked out into the night. 'Of course you know what happened — at the beginning,' he said. 'At the beginning, when I first saw you — at Norah's, in the wood — you were one of the sirens. You attracted me, at once; exceedingly; in spite of your age. I had never met a woman who attracted me more. Your type: — frost and sunlight; gaiety and hardness. — Your eyes, that darkest blue; the way your lip lifts when you smile; the arms of Helen of Troy. — I saw it all; at once. I see these things at once in women. And then, I don't know why or how — perhaps merely because we are both over fifty — I became sober and reasonable. — No; better than that; far better. — You made me feel safe; healed; or, at all events, sheltered. I became quite sentimental over it; saw us growing old together; standing by the fountain with the little boy; looking at the blue anemones in spring; watching the yellow rose grow on the front of the house; — it's there already, you know; and the anemones are planted. I would never have asked anything but the shelter. You may be sure

of that. I'd have had too much sense, once I had found it, to risk spoiling it. And now it's spoiled. All spoiled.'

It was as if the word, in its different context, had passed from her mind to his. He stood there at the window, his back turned to her, leaning his face close to the pane as if to gaze out at the darkness that was all he had before him, and he gave a great sigh, like a tired child. Her heart rose up — to her lips — as she heard him. But it was full of thankfulness as well as of grief. 'Not quite spoiled, dear Godfrey,' she said, 'or I should not be here.' And he did not turn to her. He understood.

'Do you remember,' he said presently — the embers had fallen, an owl had hooted, the clock had struck, sadly, reluctantly; it was twelve o'clock — 'that talk we had — it's only the other day, really, but it seems years ago — when you came here through the wood? I felt that I had reached the end of everything that day. It was like mildew creeping over me; and when I saw you sitting there, where you are now, I felt that you had too.'

Yet how far she had been on that distant day from having reached the end of things. Sitting quietly in her chair Monica saw again the bee-face of the engine coming round the curve. 'And we

talked,' said Ingpen, 'about love and suffering; and we agreed that life is a delusion, and we agreed, all the same, that we preferred it to Nirvana. And you said then — do you remember? — that perhaps our preference had a meaning.' He closed the curtains and turned to her and leant back against the window-frame, folding his arms. 'I often think of it.'

'Yes. I remember. I think I remember our talk; — though not clearly.' She rested her forehead on her hand, trying to remember; not only for him but for herself. There was something that they must try to see together. 'I don't think that we meant quite the same sort of love, did we? Or the same sort of suffering.'

'Yes, we did. Exactly the same sort. There is only one sort of both; and of happiness. You said we kept the love we gave; you tried to make it safer so; and I said that that sort was as much of a delusion as the other. I said there was no safety anywhere — for saint or sinner; — granting if you like, that you are the one and I am the other.'

'You must not get angry with me if we are to think together.' Monica gently smiled in the shadow of her hand. 'You know I don't grant it, though you seem to have gone more astray than I

have ever been in danger of doing. I have not led a dangerous life — that's all the difference, perhaps. I have had shelter.'

'If I pretend to get angry with you, it's only because you are so dear to me,' said Ingpen. 'And I want if possible to get some comfort out of you before we part. It's a little comfort to know that you mind parting, almost as much as I do. — But I'm really not being personal. I wasn't that day — in spite of the other side of it; — that was the difference, with you; one reached something else. — And we did agree that the only real thing was suffering; that all the rest was youth and froth and illusion; that all the rest fades. We did agree, I am sure of it, that the sort of happiness that Hester and her friends believed in is a sheer will-o'-the-wisp. Happiness for the race, you know, when we have got rid of our greed and cruelty and become hygienic and rational and orderly.'

'Yes; but it's worth while to get rid of greed and cruelty if we can. I know what they mean. I admire it.'

'You never will get rid of them; they are life; part of life. You will get them in more surreptitious forms; that's all. We shall go on devouring each other — because life can only maintain itself so;

but we shall hire butchers to do the killing first. And even if there were something in it — in the idea of a better race — it could only be for a time; until the earth begins to cool and we degenerate into forms of life too low for such aspirations. For a time humanity may rise; it may reach a more decent level than any it has yet attained to; but even then, the craving for love, the craving for power, will never lessen till life itself begins to fade. Hester and her friends believed that those cravings could be better managed. — Poor child! I can hear her talk! — They believed that they may be harnessed to useful machinery; — be made to plough and reap and irrigate. But it's not so; you will never rationalize craving; you can only deviate it; and it may corrode us the more for being deviated. People who were loved once, will long to be loved again, and consume away with grief; people who have power without opportunity will canker with rage and envy; it may all stumble on, better than in the past; but for imagining that it will ever mean happiness or offer an ideal; — no; that's not possible; — when one has felt the facts in one's flesh and blood; — when one has seen in oneself everything one most hates in life. We do agree, you and I; we do see the truth; that beautiful things come to an end and are

broken; and that we shall go on suffering until we are put to sleep for ever.'

Monica, while she listened, leaning forward on her hand, trying to think, to follow the arraignment — his bitter sincerity shot through, as always, with the glint of his bitter parade — felt exhaustion overwhelming her and almost feared that she might faint. But, lifting her eyes, she saw that he was still standing at the other side of the room, leaning against the window, and waiting; waiting for her to give him some comfort before they parted. He believed that she might have some comfort for him; and she pressed her hand against her eyes and thought of herself; of Clive and Hester; of Ingpen and of the little dog lost and stoned to death; of all the cruelty and horror; — in oneself; in life. And at last she said: 'We shall go on suffering until we go to sleep; but we can go on loving too.'

'Suffering because we love,' said Ingpen.

'Yes: that's perhaps the best we can hope for; but often because we don't love; because we don't give love. To give is life and not to give, death; and the love that is life redeems us from death. It is given to us. We find it.' She was remembering how it had come to her to-day and how it was with her now. 'We can only give it if it is first given.' —

That was the paradox, and she felt herself pause to look at it as she saw it for the first time. — 'If we never found it, if we felt life only as loss and change, we could not love life as we do. We love it because we find love. In spite of everything.'

He did not move. He did not speak. She knew that he was standing there looking at her and she dropped her hand and raised her eyes to his.

From the first she had seen something endearing and ingenuous in his ravaged face, and it was now that his innocent gaze brought her her deepest vision of him. She saw him as a little boy, as young, nearly, as Robin, who had been frightened, and who had come to his mother with a question. It was all there in his face as he said slowly: 'But in that case, if it is given, there would be a Giver. There would be a Giver — who cared to give. I wonder if you are right. I often wonder about it all. Do you really think there may be a meaning in it for us? — "And God will wipe away all tears from their eyes." — Do you really think that possible?'

It was the question of the little boy longing for comfort; it was the question of myth and legend. But it was only in the terms of myth and legend that the deepest questions could be asked or answered. — 'We are all nothing more than children,' thought

Monica — while the question fell, like a plummet, down, far down, into her heart. — 'And we discover, as we grow old, that we never grow up;' — and she seemed to listen to its fall and to watch it. It fell beyond thought, towards the unfathomable foundations of the cliff. She watched it disappear. Her mind could give her nothing. But he was asking nothing of her mind.

The memory of the wide golden sunset that she had watched with Hester rose within her now as, leaning her head on her hand, she kept silence. Had he asked that question this morning she could have answered him only in the terms of the nightmare vision; of hallucinated life and obliterating death. What had happened to her since then? It had been as if she had left life and death behind her and as if — she watched the sunset broadening — salvation had been made manifest. Not the saving from death; it was deeper than that withdrawal back into existence; the saving from darkness and alienation. It had been given. She could have done nothing by herself. It had come to her and widened before her like the sunset. And could salvation, manifested here and now to the darkened selves, fail to express its essential being for ever and to include all grief in its atoning beatitude?

She remembered afterwards, as it came back to her in its preciousness, the sacramental significance of their last moments together, but she could remember no words. Her assurance, if assurance it was, her faith, rather, had been conveyed in the look that she had at last lifted towards him, the silence in which their eyes had communed with one another's. Peace passed from her to him and together they partook of its meaning.

It had been like the symbol of this communion, when, seeing her deadly weariness, he had gone away and found milk and heated it and made her drink before her homeward walk, drinking with her. At the time everything had been so blurred by her exhaustion that she had known only the primitive comfort of silence, warmth and nourishment, that, and a faint amusement at the monotony of her repasts; for she seemed to have spent the intervals of the day in drinking milk, with just this flavour added of the brandy that he, like Hester, found suitable to her case. All was done calmly and concisely, with no flurry of search or overturning of saucepans such as she associated with improvised meals. He brought the jug and glasses on a tray; there were biscuits on a plate and a spoon. It re-

minded her of the way he had cut down the trellis. And afterwards she leaned on his arm for the dark walk home.

They met nobody. The night was still and cloudy; but a few faint stars showed here and there in the darker spaces above them. A sheep bleated behind a hedge, and, as they approached Oddley Green, they heard the owls hoot from the elms. They paused before the road reached the first cottage. Till then they had not spoken. 'You can go alone now?' said Ingpen.

'Perfectly. Thanks so much,' said Monica. They might have met that day for the first time. 'You will always let me know where you are.'

'Shall I?'

'Yes. Always please. I will come to you if you send.'

'You mean if I am dying?' She felt his grim smile in the question.

'Yes. If you are dying.'

'And if you are dying — will you send for me?'

'I am afraid not. — No; I can't promise that. I shouldn't be alone.'

'Well.' He took her hand. 'So it is good-bye.'

'It is good-bye.'

All was over. As Monica sank asleep the only thought in her mind was: 'Nothing is spoiled.' But, afterwards, it all came back to her; never to be forgotten.

CHAPTER XV

NO one cared if old hearts broke. Monica lay, on her awaking next morning, and almost smiled as the girlish self-pity of the thought returned to her. Until last night she had, perhaps, still been a girl and she lay now knowing that age brought acquiescence. He was not to die with his head in her hand, like Jeremy: — but he was not a lost dog; not stoned. He was lonely, yet loved and cherished; and as long as he lived the thought of her would keep alive the hope that had brushed them with its wing, as the thought of him would keep it alive in her. He was dear to her; very dear; but the sacrament of which they had partaken meant more, perhaps, than any personal relation could have done, and united them more really.

When, a little later, a note was brought to her she lay for a moment looking in a sort of bewilderment at her name written in Hester's small, scholarly hand. Last night seemed far away; but how much farther the afternoon and her own suicidal self. She had almost forgotten the world of youth; almost forgotten Clive. Yet, as she opened Hester's letter she knew that he was not less dear for having been

forgotten. Her heart was no longer shut in on its solitary love, and a shared heart is a heart enfranchised. It would be happier for Clive to be loved by an enfranchised heart.

She opened the letter. Hester's firm dark script closely filled the sheets.

'DEAR MONICA, Frank Jessup has for some time been suggesting that I should go to Russia again and write a series of articles for the "Enquirer" on developments there, and it seems the moment to close with the offer. So I am going up to London by the 12.40 and shall stay with Frank and Marcia for a day or two and then be off. If I could have foreseen this on Thursday, I wouldn't have asked Godfrey to go and perhaps you know where he is and could tell him to come back. But perhaps you and Clive will like to stay on at Oddley, and in that case it is necessary that Godfrey should be kept away; Clive could never stand seeing him. My going off on the same day as he does will make some gossip, I imagine; but I like to be quite frank with you and hope you will go on understanding — as you did yesterday — if I say that gossip about me will be all to the good, where Clive is concerned. You see, I found him and Celia up here, on the hill, the

other evening, when I came back from London, and saw then what I had never realized before — purblind fool that I have been — how deeply Clive cared for her; how he depended on her — or could depend on her again. And I know, though the less said about it the better, that if they could come together it would be far the happiest thing for everyone concerned. At the same time I would like you to know that I should never go back to Godfrey — even if he wanted me to, which he doesn't — though he and I might agree to fix up appearances so that Clive and Celia can marry. Clive is opposed to my decision, and I couldn't leave him in the state he is in unless you were here; so this is really to ask you to come over and see after him as soon as I am gone. The sooner I go the better. I merely tear him to pieces by staying on, now that the decision is really taken. He thinks me incredibly cruel and hard; but I believe you will understand. You won't forget what I said to you about him yesterday. Wives can get to feel about their husbands what mothers feel, after a time, though at the first it would have seemed impossible; — I mean being really able to think of their happiness apart from one's own. I have sent Robin up to London for the day with Nurse so that he shall be well out of the way. He will be very

happy, I feel sure, with you and Celia. He has taken a great fancy to her already, and she to him, and you know that he has always really liked being with you rather than with me. You can tell him all the fairy-tales you like now, Monica! I was a beast that night. — Though it's quite true that I don't think they are good for him. As to the future, I shall never make any conditions about being allowed to see him and all that sort of sentimentality because I think it really dislocates a child's life — having to adjust itself to two centres and care for two mothers.' Here came a sentence that had been scratched out; but it could still be deciphered: 'All the same I hope I shall see him sometimes,' but, after this repented lapse into maternal weakness the letter resumed its steady course. 'I don't really think I am a maternal woman. I don't understand children instinctively. It made me frightfully angry when I saw that you thought my book great rot, but I'm inclined now to believe that you were right; at least, that one needs more than a knowledge of psychology — and even more than being a mother — to write a book like that. Of course Robin doesn't know that I am going; and it's best that he should only realize, little by little, like the rest of the world, that I'm not coming back. I think I said yesterday the things

that most needed saying and I am glad you know me better and that I know you. It is really — if you will forgive my saying so — because I begin to know you at last, and Celia, that I feel I can go away and leave Clive to you. I should have been conceited enough to have thought that no one else could do for him what I could. But I was mistaken about that — as about so many things. So, wishing you the best of luck, dear Monica,

'Yours ever

'HESTER'

Monica laid down the letter on the sheet. Here it was in her hand. What had been the dearest wish of her heart for years was accomplished. Hester was eliminated. And the thought brought her no joy. On the contrary, she knew, as she lay there, that dismay was closing in upon her. The face of Celia, summoned by an act of will and at Hester's bidding, only rose to share in her consternation. Arctic, moonlike, it floated over the plains. Some possibilities, once extinguished, could only shine with a reflected radiance for ever after. Clive and Celia might once have married; but Hester was his wife. Hester was here, close by; she was nearer, strange as it was to realize it, than Celia. A person hated

for five years was a person brought near. Hatred carved its dark conceptions, its dark interpretations, and then the hollowed form turned round and revealed itself in relief; the same, yet almost unrecognizable. *Elle est ben trop noire;* the Madonna eyes of reprobation; against what a background did she now see her old distastes! The strength of Hester's arm was round her shoulders, snatching her from death; its warmth was beneath her hand, sustaining her. Hester might still be strange to her; but she was near.

It was a grey, fresh day. Yesterday had still been almost summer; to-day was almost winter and as Monica approached The Crofts she saw that the hedgerow trees, in the climbing lane behind it, were nearly leafless. But a savour of sweetness was in the air and on the cherry-tree at the gate a robin was singing its silvery song, symbolic to her ear of all she had come to rescue; childhood under a secure heaven; old age hand in hand beside the hearth; the promise of spring and winter's harvesting of unity; all the sacred platitudes.

She went quietly up the path, so quietly that the robin did not cease its singing, and opened the door and went in. Everything was still in the little house though, in the distance, she could just hear the

murmur of voices in the kitchen where the maids no doubt were in surmising conference. Her eye was drawn, as she stood there, to a suitcase standing near the door, a strong leather suitcase marked 'H. W.' Hester was packed and ready for the Bolsheviks. The drawing-room door was ajar and she looked in. In the further end, at the window that gave on the garden behind the house, Hester sat writing with her back to her. Her slight figure was framed from on high by the opulent folds of Mrs. Jessup's batik curtains with which it was in strange contrast. Monica saw now, clearly, that Hester had never harmonized with Mrs. Jessup's curtains; as little as with her own chintz and china. She was a creature of either the open heath or the underground railway. She belonged to no æsthetic background. She wore, this morning, her dark blue skirt and her red jumper and her hair was neatly brushed to a point on the nape of her neck. Beside her on the ground stood an open attaché case and as she dropped a folded paper into it and drew a fresh sheet towards her she looked extremely composed and efficient. Monica, however, now saw the statue in the round and knew what lay on the other side of Hester's composure. She was occupied in cutting away her roots; but it would not

be without emotion. She did not believe in roots; yet they ran as deeply in hers as in any human heart and bled as bitterly when severed. They did not believe in roots, Hester and her generation; they believed in the swift, unflinching adaptibility that roots menaced, or made impossible. And perhaps they were not altogether wrong, thought Monica, still pausing, still gazing at the resolute young figure, the future, was it not? — as she herself was the past. Roots meant sweetness, security, sameness; the old found again in the new; continuity and bondage. They gave you as reward a flower, and Hester's world moved too quickly for such slow rewards. It was a world of machinery, rather; of things you made and used and cast aside; things of which you remained master and that never mastered you. Roots mastered you; and perhaps the world of the future was a world of change, of swift improvisation, where ruthlessness and decision were the price of survival. It was difficult for her eyes to foresee what beauty there might be in such a world, yet Hester, sitting there in her ruthlessness, was not alien to her. It was better to cut through and escape if withering were the doom of persistency, and not only one's own withering, but that of those one loved. They refused the discipline of tradition,

Hester and her generation; they would be self-disciplined; and she saw their valour, their integrity, and their peril. A new age was always perilous. It was as though the fostering epoch of the plant-consciousness were over and the human flower, its product, walked away on its feet, nourished by no sap from below and sustained only by some new element in the surrounding atmosphere of which newly evolved faculties were for the first time aware. 'It may work; it may work; — in ways we can't conceive of,' Monica thought, standing there, her heart strangely held by pity and understanding. 'There may be enough to grow on — since they feel it. It will be a world of walking flowers. Dangerous; but they accept danger.'

She turned away and went softly up the stairs. Robin's day-nursery was in front, facing south; Hester had chosen the best bedroom for her child. She passed that, glancing in at its sunny order, and went down the little passage that led, at the other side of the house, to Clive and Hester's room. She stood for a moment before the door and listened hearing no sound; then she tapped, very softly, and Clive's weary voice said: 'Come in.'

Monica had not seen the room since her first visit to the completed Crofts, and, as she glanced at it,

her eye passing over Clive who lay turned from her on his pillows, it looked almost as denuded as then, like a bright modern room in a shop-window. Hester's bed of painted wood might never have been occupied, so accurately drawn above so flat a surface was its cover of putty and flame and black; her dressing-table was empty of all appurtenances; the cupboards in the walls were neatly closed; the chairs stood in their appointed places; even the bright little fire, lighted for the invalid, might have been an imitation fire; it carried out the colouring scheme as accurately as the flame and putty and purple of the pictures on the walls in their broad black frames. Yet though it was denuded Clive did not look abandoned in it. A glass of water, a vase of late roses, his letters unopened, and the folded morning paper lay on the table beside him. He had only to get up, to make a gesture, to take up the new life to which Hester was leaving him, in order to break through the bright magic that seemed to surround him.

His mother scrutinized him and noted that though he seemed almost sleeping, the hand lying out on the sheet was tightly clenched. 'What is it?' he said. He thought it was the maid.

'Clive dear ——' She advanced from the door,

but she did not meet his eyes. She could not look at Clive yet. She walked to the window and stood there with her back to him. From the window one saw the hill behind the house. The turf was misted with spider's webs and the sheep were all the colour of mushrooms. Above the hill was a little space of blue. 'I've come to see you, Clive,' she said.

There was silence for a moment behind her; then, in a careful voice, Clive said: 'It's very kind of you, Mother. More than kind. But Hester doesn't leave me till the afternoon.'

'I know. I won't take Hester's time. I only want to talk to you a little. — Hester has told you that we met yesterday?'

'Yes. Of course. — She said you'd been wonderful. You and I'll talk later, Mother. When she's gone. There's nothing to be done now; really.'

She turned at that and looked at him. He lay back on his pillows, a spot of hard colour on each cheek. 'I'm all right, I promise you,' he muttered as he met her eyes. 'You needn't treat me as if I were spun glass. I lie here because she's left me nothing else to do. I can't go down and wrestle with her at the door before the taxi-driver and the maids.'

'No; of course you can't,' Monica murmured. 'But you do know, don't you, that she is as un-

happy as you are. You do know that it's not from lack of love that she is leaving you.'

'Mummy,' Clive muttered, gazing at her and after a moment's silence: 'I don't know where you stand; I don't know what you're trying to do for me; — but I do know that it's no good. — She won't stay. Not even if it were you as well as I who asked her to.'

'Why not, Clive?' She advanced and sat down on the chair at the foot of the bed and Clive's eyes were sounding her. He did not know where she stood; but he must see that she was changed; he must see that it was no longer Hester's enemy he confronted; and as he kept silence she said again: 'Why not? I traduced Hester the other night, and you trusted her. You left me full of love and trust. You said that every drop of your blood was hers. What was it that happened when you got back to her? Why did she feel that she must leave you? Tell me, Clive? You must tell me. You must trust me. — You can trust me now,' said Monica.

He turned away his face and shut his eyes and she saw that he was thinking hard. The thin, beautiful hand, the archangel hand, clenched itself again as he lay there thinking and when at last he spoke Clive was nearer than he had ever been, for

he trusted her, completely; with his own and with Hester's life. 'I was horribly upset,' he said.

'Yes. Of course. But you trusted her.'

'It wasn't my trust I was thinking of,' Clive muttered. 'It was something very different. — All the way up here, after I'd left you — it was something very different I was thinking of. — It was of him.' A scarlet flush mounted to his face as he spoke. 'I understand what's happened, Mother; and you understand. Hester understands too; though she won't accept it. How could you have believed anything but what you did — of a man like that?'

As she heard his broken phrases; as she saw the dark, bright colour rise to her son's face, Monica, for a moment, knew such a turning of the heart that she feared her own blood would echo his. But it was, she felt, a drained pallor that met Clive's eyes as he opened them to look, heavily, at her, and as she heard her own voice saying: 'A man like that?'

'Why, Mummy, don't let's pretend,' said Clive. He felt her emotion, though it was so stilled, and he moved his eyes from her face and looked out of the window beyond her head. 'You may have liked him; but that was because you knew nothing, really, about him. I know, unfortunately, a great deal. I

know what sort of reputation he has, where women are concerned. It has been discreditable to him. He had to leave the army because of it. He is the last sort of man I could have associated with Hester.' The hot colour burned on Clive's cheek while a cold fire burned in his eyes. 'I had thought of an artist; a writer; — an idealist of some sort; not a ruthless, battered libertine. — A man whose love is an insult. — Mummy,' he glanced at her, and as he had looked away from her emotion so she now looked away from his, dropping her eyes — 'I told you that I didn't writhe with male jealousy; do you remember? And it was true when I said it. But I had it all the other night; on the way up here; after I'd left you. — I had it all; every bit of it,' said Clive, and had he been lying on her heart, in his bitter abasement, her son could not have been nearer. 'I came up here,' he said, 'and I was as primitive as he is — damn him! And first it was Robin, sitting in the dusk, in the garden. — I saw he'd been frightened. — And then it was Hester, crouched on the sofa, crying. — That's how I found her. And when I asked her if it were true that Captain Ingpen had been her lover, and whether she loved him still, she said that it was true. She said she loved him still. She said she'd always love

him. I was horrible to Hester, Mummy. But she gave me too much to bear.'

A silence fell. Under the sound of her son's deep breaths Monica heard laughter in the kitchen and the robin's song in the garden. A tradesman's cart drove up and stopped at the back door. She glanced at her wrist. It was half-past eleven. Clive's eyes were closed. He was shut into his dark world of shame and passion. He had never till now inhabited such a world and strange it was to know that she accepted his initiation. His flame had been too white. It had burned down now into a hidden core of consciousness and she seemed to see the smoke and fire that tainted its limpidity.

'Clive,' she said, and as he heard her voice he opened his eyes and looked at her, 'would you have found it easier if it had been a man you could have understood her loving?'

'What do you mean?' he asked after a moment. They were, again, sounding each other.

'Would it have been easier for you to accept, if Hester's lover had been somebody you could understand her loving?'

'Why should you ask me that? You mean that I deceive myself; that I don't know myself; that I was as primitive as anyone and would have writhed,

whoever it was? — There may be truth in that. — Some truth. — But no!' — He clenched his hand and laid his arm across his eyes. 'No! If it had been anybody but that man! If I could only understand that it could be that man! And even that — for the past — I could have swallowed. She was so young. He was so — practised,' Clive groaned. 'But that she should tell me, throw it in my teeth at last, that she loves him still and will always love him! — No. Even to keep Hester I can't pretend that I accept it.'

Monica now felt herself gazing at a necessity that lay before her. She had seen it in an ominous glimpse before, when she had paled and recoiled from it; but it lay there, clearly visible now, in the path of her approach to Clive and Hester's lives, and over the heavy throbbing of her heart she steadied her voice to speak, understanding, at last, what it had all meant as she had not done till this moment came upon her. One did not understand, ever, till afterwards.

'I wonder if it will help you to accept what Hester gives you to bear if I tell you something about myself, Clive,' she said. He lay still, rigidly still, his arm before his eyes. 'You think that Captain Ingpen would not have been my friend if I had

known about him. But that isn't true. I did know about him; all that you know; and I was his friend. But it's more than that.' She had begun to speak with dropped eyes but now she raised them and fixed them on her son, who, his arm fallen, gazed at her. 'It's much more than that, Clive,' she said, and as she spoke she seemed to herself to be drawing Hester near, to be holding her within her arm, to be at one with Hester; 'Because I understand why Hester loved him, and still loves him, in a way I never could have done if he had remained only my friend.'

Clive spoke then. She heard the voice that Hester had heard; almost the voice of a stranger. 'What do you mean?'

What did she mean? She stopped to think, looking at her son, feeling no wish for veils. All that she wished was the truth. 'Not that he was my lover,' she said. 'That would have been impossible; but not because I did not love him enough. Impossible because of my age; my situation; — my codes and symbols, Clive. He is not my lover, but I love him and he loves me. We parted last night; and I don't think we shall ever see each other again; and after you, no one has come so near my heart.'

Had the presage of the October woods been for

this, she wondered, as, looking into her son's eyes, she saw his father struck down and remembered the slow brooks, the prowling figure and the fear in which the strange affinity had masked itself. But this was not disloyalty; not forgetfulness. All the loves, the lesser and the greater, the old and new, were there within her heart; swords crossing; notes clashing; though she saw, she heard, the attainable harmony. If she could stand firm and bear the pain, the harmony could be attained.

'Does it make it more, or less endurable, Clive?' she asked.

'It puts me out,' was what Clive said to her. He lay and looked at her.

'No, darling. It only puts *me* out; — if you can't forgive my loving him.'

'It puts me out,' Clive repeated, 'with you both. I'm only second-best; with you both. — Somehow — that doesn't seem enough to go on living for.'

She sat and thought.

'It's for your sake that we both put him out; because we love you most.'

'You put him out because I'm your son; and Hester puts him out because I'm her husband. But you both love him best,' said Clive, and he closed his eyes and turned his face away from her.

Was it the truth? They must face the truth, thought Monica, as, pale and trembling, she rose to her feet and moved towards Clive, and then paused, hearing a footstep outside, a hand laid on the door.

CHAPTER XVI

THE door opened and Hester stood before them. Clive turned his head and looked at her. He surveyed her steadily and she surveyed him. Then she said: 'I've come to say good-bye to Clive and he and I must be alone.'

'You shall be alone.' Monica stood beside her son. Was she the tigress at bay, or was Hester? Each was fighting for Clive but not against each other, now; against him. 'You shall be alone, when the time comes,' she said. 'But I must speak to you together, first.'

'The time has come. It's a quarter to twelve. The taxi will be here directly; and you know, Monica, all this is rather hard on Clive,' said Hester. 'I asked you to wait till I'd gone.' She had closed the door and leaned back against it, keeping her hand on the knob. Her face had no rigidity; a sodden, gentle look, rather; and the dragging, bitter lines had been effaced by desperate weeping.

'You shall be alone,' Monica repeated. 'But you can take a later train. I must speak to you. There are mistakes. There are mistakes between you and Clive as distorting as the ones I made.'

'Mistakes? Oh no; there are no mistakes now. There were before but not now,' said Hester, glancing at her husband. 'As for any you made, Monica — if you did make any — they have nothing to do with this situation.'

'I think they have everything to do with it. I think they have involved us all. And the first thing for us to do is to see the truth together. All the truth. — Clive,' she stood beside his bed and she looked down at him, 'Hester saved my life yesterday. I was so miserable, believing that you hated me, that I went out to throw myself under a train, and she saved me. And, as we talked afterwards, she said one or two things that I shall never forget. One was that she thought me rather foolish to have believed that you hated me; — I saw that it was true, when she said it; — and another was that she wondered at me for having believed that anyone who loved you, and who had known your love, could have deceived you. She said that we love the people who do not make mistakes about us and that Godfrey Ingpen had made mistakes that tore her life to pieces; — while you had always understood. — And I have something to say to you, Hester. Clive cannot understand that you should still love the man who hurt you. But I can. I understand

because I love him, too. — That's what I've been telling Clive.'

She did not look at her son as she found these succinct phrases. They seemed to cut her away from all her past life, that edifice of graces, reticences and dignities, and to set her adrift upon a sea as strange and as uncharted as any that Hester had ever embarked upon. She knew that he had leaned forward as he heard her, his eyes fixed upon her, his arms outstretched along the sheet; but she did not look down at him. 'Clive can't understand us, Hester,' she said, keeping her bright, intrepid eyes upon her daughter-in-law. 'He believes that we love the other best. Is that true, do you think? And if Clive can make such mistakes about us, do you feel that he loves us still?'

Hester's hand had slowly dropped from the knob. She leaned back against the door, her arms folded, and her eyes were the Madonna eyes of gloom and reprobation. 'So that's what you've been doing,' she said. 'I see. You'll cut your heart out to mend Clive's life, won't you, Monica? You are willing that he should believe you such another case as I am, if that will give him ease. — As to which we love best, I'm not going to answer; and I'm sure you're not. If life doesn't answer that sort of

question, nothing else will, and as for me, it doesn't make much difference what Clive believes now, does it? — Perhaps I do love Godfrey best. Who knows? — Though now that I come to think of it, it may be the people who give us most to bear who are the ones we love most at the end, and Clive has certainly shown me that he can hurt as much as Godfrey ever did. — But I'm not going into that. It's you, Monica. I see you through and through. You love Godfrey; I know it; and I know how he loves you. — He's never loved anyone so much. — But with all the will in the world you'll never make me believe that you are like me; nor make Clive believe it either.'

'Perhaps, if Clive has the insight that I believe him to have,' said Monica, gazing at her daughter-in-law, while her mind seemed to move in great flashes, 'he will wish, more than anything, that I were.'

Clive, there beside her, had bowed his head upon his arms while Hester spoke. Now she felt that he put out his hand for hers. He found it. He laid his cheek against it and held it tightly.

'I can go now,' Monica murmured, glancing down at her son. 'I can leave you now. You and Eddie see now that people who love so much cannot part.'

But Hester put her arm across the door. 'No; you can't go now,' she said. She was pale and trembling. Her eyes were wide and sick. 'You can't go now,' she repeated. 'I've something to say first, too. — Yes, Clive. — She is the best friend you will ever have. No one will ever do for you what she does — or love you as much. But I'm not going to be given back to you by her. I'm not going to have you accept from her what you won't from me. — It's not only Godfrey. — It's deeper than that — the reason for our parting. I'm not the sort of woman you ought to have fallen in love with. Monica saw the truth from the beginning I came into your life and I broke it.'

'It's not the truth,' said Clive. He had raised his head. He held his mother's hand, but he faced his wife with his own strength. 'You mended my life. You are my life; and if you leave me now it will be from pride — not from love, as you think. — It will be because you won't share me with my mother; — as I felt I couldn't share you with the other man you love. Well; I can. And if it's because of Mummy, you must put up with it; just as she has to put up with the fact that it's you who are my life; not she.'

'All right,' Hester muttered, and, darkly flushed,

she seemed to glance at her husband with hostility. 'All right. You think that the truth. — Sit down, Monica. I'd rather have it out, now.' She pulled forward the chair from the dressing-table and placed it against the door and sat down, leaning back her head. 'We'll have it out,' she repeated, and she stopped for a moment, controlling her thought with an effort that swept her face clear of its dark passion. 'We must go back to the beginning,' she said, 'the very beginning, when Clive says I mended his life. It's true that I helped him over his bad time. I knew how to deal with ghosts, because I'd seen so many myself; but any good psycho-analyst could have done as much. It wasn't to mend his life that I came into it, or to be mended that Clive came to me; it was because we fell in love with each other, and when one's in love one imagines that it's enough and that nothing else counts and that it will carry you through. — Well, there are some things it doesn't carry you through; and that's what we came to find out; that's what Clive knows as well as I do.'

She paused to think and in the pause, still keeping her son's hand tightly held in hers, Monica sat down softly on the bed beside him. They were united as they had never yet been united. Their pulses

seemed to beat together, and as she felt the deep tide of peace rising within her Monica knew that her strength, now, was greater than Hester's, and her understanding greater.

'You didn't exist for me, Monica; you simply didn't exist,' said Hester. 'If I thought of you at all, I thought of you as the Victorian Aunt Sally my generation has been brought up to shy coconuts at. The only thing that defined you clearly for me was that you were the sort of woman who would think it wicked to have a lover. Not that Clive said you would think it wicked. He only said that you'd be hurt. That was why he wouldn't tell you. But it was more than that. It was because it would have hurt him, too, most horribly, to tell his mother that his wife had had a lover. I didn't mind, one way or the other; about your being told. But I didn't think it your business. And I didn't see, or suspect, that he was hurt all the time, though he pretended not to be. I wasn't in the least afraid at first, Monica, of you or your standards, because I didn't imagine that Clive was. It was only by degrees that I began to see that I was outside, and that you were inside, with him, always.'

As they were now, Hester meant, perhaps, though she did not glance at them. She sat there, with

folded arms, in her red jumper, against the door, and she made Monica think of a picture she had seen of a young condemned revolutionary sitting up, proud, perverse, unvindictive, to be shot. Her face was the strangest colour; the colour of a white passion-flower, its surface bloom bruised from the petals and the purple pulp showing through. Her eyes were like the flower's dark centre; bruised, too; soft and expanded; there was no fierceness in Hester's eyes to-day.

'It was mistake, then, on your side, from the very beginning, Hester,' said Monica. 'Clive was not inside with me. He never once came inside. It was I who was put out; not you. It was you who had put me out; — me and my obsolete standards.'

Hester's eyes did not move from the window. 'Of course that was what you felt. That was what Clive meant you to feel; that was what he did for me. Because it was I, not you, who was making him suffer, and he had to hide it from me. I made him suffer from the beginning, because I was too different from you. It wasn't only in one standard; it was in all the standards; down to the way you dressed and the jokes you had together. He was always hiding from me, poor Clive; in the little things as well as the big ones. It's impossible in

marriage, I see that now, if the wife is so different, and the man loves his mother so much. I was very slow in seeing the truth. I was a complacent dolt, of course. But by degrees it came over me that Clive was unhappy, fearfully unhappy; that he was thinking about you all the time, and wondering. He used to call out in his sleep — oh, we joked about it, of course, and pretended it was his nerves; — but I began to see that he called out for you because his heart was full of you and he was wondering if you weren't miserable down here, alone, with nothing in your life. You played up awfully well, Monica; allow me to say that. I watched you carefully, and I watched him, and I saw that you gave him nothing to go on. But he knew perfectly well that you couldn't stand me and that you removed yourself lest you should be forced to show it. He saw that you couldn't stand me, and he saw why,' and round Hester's lips there now crept the shadow of the bitter savour. 'He saw why just as well as you did; better than you did; — And shall I tell you why he could go on standing me? — Simply and solely because he was still in love with me; simply because of sex; nothing else. It was that you were sacrificed to. A man will always sacrifice his mother to the woman he's in love with, I suppose, and a

mother will always cut herself in pieces to help mend his life. We understand all that. But it's what lies underneath that matters now; because there are deeper things in life than even sex. — He sacrifices her because he is in love; but he is nearer her than ever because he has sacrificed her. What I've come to see in these last months,' said Hester, gazing past Monica's head out of the window, 'is that it's the family thing that always conquers in the end. It's what we all come back to, in the bottom of our hearts; — if we have any family. I have none. I'm an outsider in that way, too. I've always been a free lance, with all the conceit and theory of a free lance. But if you've ever had a mother and if she's given you and meant to you all the things you care for most, you never get over it. That's what has happened to Clive and me. And we all three know it's true. And we all three know that we can pick up and grow roots again — after I'm gone. And that,' said Hester, rising and lifting her chair and putting it down in its place before the dressing-table, 'is why I am going. And please don't let us be sentimental about it.'

'Hester,' said Monica. She, too, had risen. She still stood by her son, but she had dropped his hand and her voice arrested the girl who, half turned

away, was fumbling, perhaps through sudden tears, for the door-handle. 'Will you stay for my sake?'

Hester stood turned away, her head bent down in an attitude of sombre attention.

'I mean,' said Monica, and she felt her own tears rising, 'if I need you, too. — I have nothing to do with you and Clive now. I can't give you back to him, for you're not mine to give, nor him to you: he is yours in a way he never could be mine; in spite of what you say. But I need you, too, and I believe you can care for me. Didn't you feel it yesterday? Didn't you say that you could tell me everything? Isn't that enough to stay and try to let it grow on?'

She had put out her hands. Hester had turned and leant back against the door, solemnly looking at her. They had kissed each other so often, and the kisses had meant nothing. Now an immense shyness lay between them, but she had taken Hester's hands and Hester did not move away. She did not acquiesce, but she did not move away; she stood, solemnly looking at her.

'Perhaps you haven't changed as much. Perhaps you don't feel it as I do,' said Monica. 'But I know that I have found you and that I love you and don't want to go on without you. Will you stay and be my daughter?'